

## **This Town** by **Lost Girl 02**

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**Summary:** The story of Mike Wheeler and Eleven might have started one rainy night in the fall of 1983, but it certainly didn't end there as well. December 14, 1996 a day that stands to define how their relationship will be remembered. A blissful young romance that crashed and burned? Or an enduring saga of love that transcends dimensions? Based off of the song "This Town."

# 1. The Snow Ball

A/N: So I've had this idea brewing in the back of my head since this song was relevant (so a long time) and since I'm nearly done writing it and in honor of "Stranger Thursdays" on Twitter I decided to finally post this.

Full disclosure, I've never written for the Stranger Things fandom or a songfic before but "This Town" by Niall Horan is one of the most Mileven songs I've heard so i just decided to pick apart the whole thing. There will be 3-4 pretty long chapters depending on how I want to incorporate the last few scenes, but don't worry, it'll be the same length in terms of words/content either way.

Sorry for rambling! Enjoy!

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*Waking up to kiss you and nobody's there*

December 14, 1996

It was just past midnight, but Mike Wheeler couldn't sleep. He hadn't been able to sleep for the past few weeks, if he was being honest.

Although most people thought that it was immature for a twenty-five-year-old man to still play Dungeons and Dragons, much less read the manual, Mike didn't really think anyone was going to call him out on his lapse into childishness at this time of night. The darkness of the basement was broken only by the small beam of a flashlight as he skimmed through the old binder. The sight of monsters to fight and different lands to travel sparked the storytelling light in his brain, and his fingers itched for a pencil to start planning a new campaign.

He smirked at his own train of thought, running a hand through his dark hair as he set the binder on the old D&D table. Sighing, he clicked the flashlight off, bathing the room in complete darkness while his eyes were struggled to adjust.

To avoid all the conflicting emotions that threatened to surface in the

silence of the basement, he focused on the sounds of the house. The old floorboards creaked with the wind, and the wheezy radiator worked overtime to counteract the cold that seeped through the walls. Mike knew that no one would be up so late at night, but he wished that there was someone he could talk to.

However, once the thought of talking to someone entered his mind, there was only one person he wanted to see. But she was so far away—literally and figuratively. Even when they were dating, El had always seemed so out of reach in his mind for years.

Mike released a massive sigh, closing his dark eyes for a moment, before sitting up and looking over at the corner of the basement where blankets and quilts used to hide a telekinetic girl. His heart beat even more rapidly than it already was and his breath started coming in short bursts. *Get a grip*, he thought, tearing his gaze from the corner and back to the dim outline of the D&D binder. El had never really participated in their campaigns, choosing instead to watch happily from the side, but he did make a point to work the proud princess—or some variation of her—into their adventures after that fateful week.

A smile ghosted across his features, remembering the way she would read aloud old campaigns he had written to improve her vocabulary. She would usually ask him to read sections to her since his handwriting was notoriously indecipherable, which would always lead to him expanding the campaign to include her, while her head rested on his shoulder.

*I hope El's okay*, the familiar sentiment filled his thoughts, along with the instinct to protect a girl who could overpower him without lifting a finger. His mind was now stuck on El for the foreseeable future, and the cocktail of emotions that had more in common with his twelve-year-old self flooded his system. "This is going to be a long day", he groaned to himself, dropping his head back into his arms.

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*The smell of your perfume still stuck in the air*

November 21, 1983

After the...incident...at the middle school, a whole fleet of fire trucks, ambulances, and police cars had descended on the three boys, separating them, and Mike found himself sitting in the back of an ambulance, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders. Tears burned in his eyes, but he refused to let them fall in front of a bunch of paramedics and firefighters. But when his mom appeared, running frantically through the maze of vehicles he just stood up, letting himself sob tearlessly into her shoulder.

The next few hours passed in a blur, especially after hearing the news that the Chief and Mrs. Byers had rescued Will from the Upside-Down. Mike's dad wanted to take everyone home, and let the "government officials" decide when the boys could see their friend, but one angry look from his mom settled the matter.

The drive to the hospital was uncharacteristically silent, Mike could tell Dustin and Lucas were exhausted from their week-long ordeal and he, frankly, just didn't feel like talking to anyone for a while. However, his lips lifted slightly when they pulled up to the hospital and saw Nancy and Steve.

"Mike!" His sister shouted, dashing forward to wrap him in a tight hug. "Oh my gosh what happened?"

"You're just like Mom, you know that right?" He asked, half-jokingly half-seriously, since those were also the first words his mother had said to him.

"Yeah, I do," Nancy whispered, choosing to ignore his deflection of her question.

"I'm gonna' go find us some seats," Steve said, giving Nancy a quick peck on the cheek before heading through the doors. As if they were on a date to the movies, not at a hospital to wait for a boy who had just returned from another dimension to wake from a coma.

"Don't give me that look. He's actually a pretty great guy," she defended her boyfriend, finally letting her brother go.

Mike followed his family and friends inside, and into a cramped waiting room with just enough seats for everyone. He settled next to

Lucas and across from his dad, unable to stop his leg from bouncing now as they started the long wait for Will to wake up.

Hours passed and the waiting room fell silent, everyone mediating on the events of the past couple hours. Although Mike didn't know what his sister, Steve, and Jonathan had went through, he knew that it wouldn't be leaving them anytime soon, as evidenced by the bruises that covered Steve's face or the blood and sweat stains that covered all three.

Even once Will woke up and the friends were reunited, the time flew by in a blur, and before he knew it, Mike was being shooed up the stairs to his room by his mom and Nancy.

He sighed, flopping down on his bed, all of the energy seemed to flow out of him, and the first tears started to leak out of the corners of his eyes. He was glad, of course, that Will was back from the Upside-Down, but it was difficult to accept that it felt like they had traded El for Will. When the tears started to run over his forehead, Mike sat up and glanced over at the clock on his nightstand. "12:27," he croaked to himself, his throat tight with sadness. He could now say that it was *yesterday* that he jumped off the quarry's edge, and that it was *yesterday* that El had found Barb and Will in the homemade sensory deprivation tank, and that it was *yesterday* that the Demogorgon was killed.

The sadness washed over him again, as the finality of El's... disappearance—he refused to believe she was dead—set in. Mike crept out of his bedroom, desperate to channel his energy into something productive, and tiptoed down the stairs, pausing outside the kitchen.

"How could we not know?" His mom asked, and he could picture her clasped hands resting underneath her chin.

"Not know what?" Came the faint reply, from his ever-clueless dad.

"About this, this *mission* our son and his friends were on. Not to mention the fact that the girl was *living in our basement!*" Mike was taken aback for a moment at the fact that his mom knew about El, but once he thought about it for a second, he realized that Mrs. Byers

must have filled her in on the girl's part in Will's miraculous return from the dead.

He crept past the kitchen and carefully slipped through the basement door, closing it softly behind him. The basement had always been his sanctuary, the place where he hung out with his friends and had sleepovers, and for the past week, the place where it had become a sanctuary for someone else.

The pillow fort lay in shambles after he had knocked it down this mor—*yesterday morning*. Taking a shaky breath in an attempt to keep from sobbing, Mike picked up one sheet, and started to rebuild El's sanctuary. It shouldn't have taken him very long, he still remembered how he had put it up the first time, but the moment he went to set up the pillows, he stopped dead in his tracks.

It took him nearly twenty minutes to pick up the SuperCom. And when he crawled forward into the fort to pull it out, he smelled the faint scent of laundry detergent, dirt, and some strawberry spray of Nancy's, a mixture that reminded him so much of El that he almost ran back up the stairs to lock himself in his room. His vision started to become blurry, as he remembered her face when he explained "friend." How she looked up at him from her fort, her face remaining a little closed-off and confused, but how her big hazel eyes showed that she had never had anyone close to a friend. Until he, Lucas, and Dustin took her in.

Mike turned around, unable to look at the fort for another second, and quickly threw the SuperCom behind him, not really caring where it landed. He looked around the basement, and it felt wrong, somehow. Like El was meant to be nodding off to sleep behind him, or the playful arguments of his friends were supposed to be ringing through the air, not the soft sobs of a twelve-year-old boy.

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*It's hard*

*Yesterday I thought I saw your shadow running 'round*

December 18, 1983

The weeks after Will's return saw a shift in the Wheeler house.

Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler carried along like almost nothing had changed, but they did seem to treat their children with a bit more caution. Conversations became overly polite, and they were always seemed to be choosing their words incredibly carefully, especially around Mike.

Holly giggled, running around the house and showing off her first baby tooth to fall out to anyone who had eyes. She didn't always understand why she would find her sister staring blankly at her wall of pictures, or why her brother was scared when she played with a light switch. Her own encounter with the Monster in the Wall was forgotten within a few days, her young mind finding a way to erase the horrifying memories of that week.

Nancy felt cheated by the Upside-Down, and her anger burned through her system for hours, before she saw a picture of Barb and she simply felt empty. Why would the Demogorgon kill her best friend, yet save her brother's? There was no way, she would ever tell him of her jealousy, knowing how much he had sacrificed to save his own best friend. Even Steve noticed the way any mention of Barb could set her off, so he avoided her name at all costs, choosing instead to become better friends with Jonathan and finding new friends after he dropped Tommy H. and Carol. Their relationship had become so much stronger after he returned to fight with her and Jonathan, and she even officially introduced him to her parents, an unthinkable act before that week.

Mike turned into himself for a time, only really coming alive when he was writing a campaign or playing it out with Will, Dustin, and Lucas. But most of the time, he sulked around the house, barely smiling, laughing, or even talking. His depression even started to lift as the Snow Ball approached, muttering "promised, she promised," under his breath every night. Yet the dance came and went, his mood fouled even more, but not in the way one would expect. Instead of a flaring temper, he seemed to suppress most emotions, responding in short phrases or a sentence when asked something. He stopped standing up to Troy and James, but never actively tried to avoid the bullies.

His friends tried to bring him out of this funk by convincing Mr.

Clarke to replace the Heathkit, not realizing that it only served as a reminder of the girl who destroyed it. It was only when his parents wanted to take him to a shrink, that Mike forced himself out of his depression. Settling into a routine of school, A.V. Club, homework, and D&D, he appeared to have returned to his former self, but there were times, late at night when no one was awake, Mike let the piece of him that still missed El take over, engulfing him in an Upside-Down-like darkness, before shrinking back and being tucked away deep inside his mind.

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*It's funny how things never change in this old town*

January 16, 1984

Eleven was cold. So cold that even if she did escape this awful place, she did not think that she would ever feel warm again. She curled into a tight ball every night, wishing that she was in the Wheeler's real basement, the blankets providing some form of warmth, instead of a constant weight that let her know that she was hadn't died yet.

She had killed the Demogorgon. She had to have. El didn't want to think that she had ripped herself away from her friends, but left the monster alive enough to hurt them again. Although killing it hadn't been easy, and had drained almost all of her energy, she was slowly recovering and her "powers" were coming back bit by bit every day.

Every day, she would venture out into the grayness of her world, walk down deserted streets and into the woods full of dead trees to find a small box that usually contained a little bit of food wrapped in plastic. Today, however, the box was empty. Her heart rose into her throat, her bony hands tearing at the bottom of the box and tears leaked down her hollow cheeks.

In the back of her mind, she knew that she was likely too early, but the irrational fears were heightened in the Upside-Down, and she couldn't help the wave of helplessness that crashed over her. Feeling incredibly defeated, she turned and started walking back to Mike's house, the ashy flakes dusting her shoulders and hair. Having the box of food there every day didn't just ensure she didn't starve in the time she's been in the Upside-Down, it was also like having a friend. Mike



had taught her what that word meant that first night in his basement, but he had shown her what it felt like over and over and over again. But none of her friends were with her now; she was alone in the Upside-Down.

Not even her surroundings changed much, remaining a pale imitation of Hawkins, and although she had only caught glimpses of the town, she knew that it wasn't supposed to be crumbling around her. Vines crawled up the sides of all the buildings and slugs inched their way across the cracked asphalt of the road. The only way she could tell the passage of time in such a gray world was how long her hair was, and from the short curls that started to frame her skull, she guessed that it had been around two months since she had first woken up in the terrible world. The emptiness of the Upside-Down crept inside El, and seemed to rest inside her chest and wormed its way into her mind.

"Monster," she murmured, rubbing her hands over her eyes and wishing that the tears would come, as if they could prove that she was capable of sadness again. Even as she entered the basement through the side door, El continued to mutter the word to herself as she lay herself down in the decaying pillow fort.

Her powers were so reduced that there was no way to reach out and "talk" with Mike, but she wanted to so badly. She wanted to see his kind smile and count the little dots that spread across his cheeks and the way he would make the confusing world seem a lot less scary. The blue jacket he had given her was lost, back at the middle school, and she missed its comforting weight around her shoulders. Although the Chief's flannel had kept the chill at bay for the first few hours in the dark place, it did not prove to be as comforting as that blue jacket had.

Sighing in exhaustion, El collapsed in the slimy and darkened version of the pillow fort. It was only when she was lying down, surrounded by blankets and sheets that should be a comfort, that the gnawing feeling in her stomach grew into an intense pain. She closed her eyes, and imagined that when she opened them, Mike would be there. He would shake her awake, practically shoving a lukewarm Eggo into her hands, before flashing her a quick smile and dashing off to school.

"Mike," El whispered contentedly, letting something that could resemble the beginnings of a smile lift her lips, before she curled even tighter into herself, as if to shield herself from the nightmares sure to come.

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*So far*

*From the stars*

December 14, 1996

The young woman gazed out the window of the old house for a moment, before creeping out of the room she couldn't believe she could still call her own. Taking care to avoid the spot in the hallway where the Demogorgon burnt all those years ago, Eleven made her way across the cluttered living room to the front porch.

Taking a deep breath, she rested her elbows on the railing and lifted her head to gaze at the tiny lights—stars—that dotted the darkness above her. El smiled to herself, brushing a lock of dark brown hair behind her ear, before looking down and staring at the strands of hair that curled around her shoulders. For the longest time, her hair was never allowed to grow long enough to brush, much less long enough for her to run her fingers through curls she didn't know she had.

El didn't think she would ever tire of the fresh air or even the harshly cold wind that blew through Hawkins, Indiana. A year in the Upside-Down had hardened her against the coldest temperatures the Midwest could drop to.

"No," she gritted her teeth, curling her fingers into her hair as memories of that horrifying year started flashing through her mind. The flakes of ash settling in her hair and lungs. Echoes of the Demogorgon's roar ringing in her ears, no matter how many times she told herself it was dead. "No, no, no, *no!*"

A section of the railing splintered and deep gashes gouged themselves into the deck, yet El's voice never rose above a whisper.

As she raised a shaky hand to brush at the drop of blood that beaded

underneath her nose, she held her breath, listening to the creak of the swing, hoping that the noise didn't wake her adoptive family. Exhaling gratefully, El resumed her observation of the night sky, carefully turning her thoughts towards a time of her life that was much happier.

Finding her way out of the Upside-Down took her a year, but the first happy memory she had once she was out was the first time she saw Mike again. She remembered the way his face broke into a wide smile and the way she nearly collapsed in his arms. El smiled at the stars as she remembered that Chief Hopper and Mrs. Wheeler had to pry him away from her before she passed out from malnourishment. She remembered being afraid that he had forgotten her, because although she had never forgotten him, El didn't have a lot of experience with friends and thought he would have moved on by the time she had returned.

Today, El was especially grateful that her thirteen-year-old-self was wrong, and had found her way back into the life of Mike Wheeler.

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*And I want to tell you everything*

March 9, 1986

El stretched out underneath the canopy of trees, relishing in the unusually warm weather, kicking off her shoes and socks, giggling childishly as the blades of grass tickled her feet.

Moments like this, the seconds or minutes where she got to enjoy the basic experiences a fifteen-year old girl was allowed to enjoy, made her feel like she was an actual normal girl. These instances almost made her forget the nightmares of the Upside-Down that plagued her every night, and the way every shadow reminded her of the shadows of the bad men or the Demogorgon. She knew better than to dwell too much on her year in the Upside-Down, but her daily nightmares made that hard to do.

But no matter how hard she tried, the sunlight filtering through the trees took a much harsher quality, and the specks of dirt that outlined the beams of light, looked like the falling ash that filled the air of the

Upside-Down. The sounds of footsteps traipsing through the woods, sounded like the heavy stomping of the bad men's boots.

"El?" Mike's voice broke through the quiet of the woods, startling the telekinetic teen, whose reaction included stripping the bark from a couple of the trees in the clearing. "Sorry, did I scare you?"

She shook her head quietly, not trusting her voice, as a small bump had lodged itself in her throat, a side-effect of the panic she almost let overtake her.

"Is there something wrong?" He handed her a tissue for the blood dripping from her nose. He then sat down next to El, letting her rest her head on his knee while he ran his fingers through her hair, his fingers snagging every so often in her curls.

Images of the shadow version of Hawkins flashed through her head, and for the briefest moment, she considered telling Mike everything. About how she could barely walk past the middle school without being reminded of the violence that had taken place in its halls. How she was terrified to close her eyes, because what if she woke up and she was back in the Upside-Down? And what if, when she told Mike all of the awful things she had done in the lab and about the sheer despair that would always cling to her, as a constant reminder of spending so many months in the Upside-Down...and he walked away from her? *He doesn't need to worry*, El decided, turning to look up at her concerned and caring boyfriend.

"Nothing is wrong, Mike."

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*The words I never got to say the first time around*

June 1, 1986

"What are you doing?" El asked, swiveling her head to watch her boyfriend and her friends dash around the Wheeler's basement, grabbing flip-flops, brightly colored towels, and stuffing them into backpacks.

"It's the first day of summer!" Dustin exclaimed, as if that would clear

up all doubt in her mind.

"We have this sort of tradition," Mike explained, skidding to a stop in front of her. "Every June first, we go down to the lake and spend the whole afternoon hanging on the shore and then bike to this little clearing on the other side to catch fireflies."

She nodded her understanding, but quickly crossed her arms when she remembered what the word "tradition" meant. "If this is a... tradition, of yours," she began, studying the downcast faces of her friends, "why haven't I heard about it until now?"

"Oh," Will jumped in, ever the peacemaker, immediately picking up on her confrontational tone. "It hasn't been warm enough these past couple years to go down to the lake."

"Yeah," Dustin agreed, trying to figure out how to fit another candy bar into his overflowing backpack. "Besides, my parents have *just now* let me go other places that isn't here, school, or basically anywhere not supervised by an adult."

El nodded, leading the way out to their bikes and climbing on the back of Mike's. For her first birthday back in the real world, the boys had gotten her a bike of her own, but even at fifteen-years-old, she always rode with Mike at every opportunity.

The sun was high in the sky when they reached the lake, turning the water into a spotlight that was incredibly difficult to look at. The boys spread out their towels on the strip of sand surrounding the water, laying down to let the sunlight wash over their faces and soaking up the warmth provided.

"El," Mike called, patting the spot next to him, and with a grin on his face that—in El's mind—could have outshone the lake.

She plopped herself down, leaning her head on his shoulder, taking his hand in her own, and playing with his fingers, a content expression coming over her own face.

That afternoon, El got to enjoy the full force of the compassion of her friends as they all enjoyed the afternoon. Lucas taught her card

games like poker and gin rummy, never letting her win, but he did lose most of his candy to her after she got the hang of poker. Dustin gave her a piggyback ride down the small beach, threatening to dunk her in the cold water if she didn't loosen her grip on his neck. Will showed her the best method of catching fireflies, which turned out to be bugs that looked like small flying balls of light, and how to put them in little mason jars to make lanterns. Mike gave her a kiss on the cheek for no reason, incurring moans from their friends and threats from Lucas to drag them back and dump them in the lake. And he gave her his sweatshirt to wear over her soaked dress when their friends did throw them in the water.

"You're never giving that sweatshirt back, are you?" He asked as they rode back to the Byers'.

El merely smiled into his back, relishing the warmth not only his clothes, but his presence gave her. No matter how old she was, or what kind of ideas the kids at school would draw from the fact that approximately half of her wardrobe consisted of his clothes, she would always love the way his sweatshirts and jackets and t-shirts would envelop her in his scent and warmth.

Correctly taking her silence as a "no," Mike laughed and shook his head which caused his dark hair to fall into his eyes as their little party rolled to a stop at the end of the Byers' driveway. "Well, I can't really get mad at you," he conceded. "It is really comfortable."

"Promise?" She studied his face, knowing that he would take "their word" seriously. Because ever since he had first explained what "promise" meant, she reveled in the idea that one word could connect two people in a way that couldn't be easily broken. And she knew that the promise he made her, back in that dreaded science classroom, bound her to him in ways that she didn't think she would ever have with another person again. "Promise" had turned into so much more than just an expression of obligation or responsibility, but one of undying friendship, compassion, and, possibly, l...

"Promise," Mike stated firmly, before wrapping her in a tight hug and pressing a kiss to the top of her head, whispering their word once more into her hair.

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*And I remember everything*

December 14, 1996

The sun was rising above the Byers' house, washing the dead lawn in light, and El squinted her eyes at the harsh change in brightness. Shielding her eyes, she turned back towards the house, rubbing her hands up and down her arms as the coldness became more obvious in the daylight.

*I should probably go back inside,* El thought. *Who knows what Will or Mom will do if they can't find me today.*

The living room had barely changed in the past decade or so, except for a fresh coat of paint covering two walls that seemed to be refreshed every few years. The old couch was still pushed up against the wall, and the few lamps in the corners would provide a bit of illumination when turned on.

"Glad that you're finally awake," a voice joked from the kitchen. Jonathan had clearly been up for some time, as he was already getting breakfast ready for the rest of the family. "One plate of Eggos for Eleven Byers," he said in a fancy voice, setting the nearly steaming plate of waffles in front of her.

"How did you..." she started, sitting down. How did her brother know that she had been up for hours, and had her favorite breakfast ready for her?

"Will hasn't been a heavy sleeper for years," Jonathan said simply, sitting down across from her. "He thought you would be needing some food in a couple hours."

El smiled gratefully, beginning to devour her Eggos at her normal breakneck pace. As the sun started to stream through the thin curtains and her older brother turned the stove on to make eggs and toast, the small room started to heat up despite the early morning chill. El pushed the sleeves of Mike's old sweatshirt up her arms, but immediately regretted the action when she caught sight of the small tattoo on her forearm.

Three little numbers had defined her childhood, but she refused to wear makeup to cover it—like Nancy or her mom had suggested. Whenever she wore short sleeves, the boys never failed to remark how "cool" it was. She blushed, thinking about the way Mike would trace the small, black numbers, saying that it was a part of herself that had made her stronger.

She ran her own finger over the numbers, the pricks of the needles that had drawn them onto her skin seemed to pierce her skin once more.

*The young girl struggled against the leather straps, holding her wrists to the metal table. Tears rolled freely down her cheeks and sobs echoed in the empty room. Her thin hospital gown swallowed up her legs, but left most of her arms bare.*

*She screamed for her papa until her throat hurt. How could her papa let the men in white take her away and strap her to this cold table? Didn't he love her? Didn't he want her to be safe?*

*The metal door opened, and a man entered, a mask covering the lower half of his face, followed by a white-haired man.*

*"Papa," the girl pleaded quietly in a scratchy voice. Using her voice sent shooting pains throughout her body, she could barely say the short word or even call for him to help her.*

*He merely turned towards the other man, nodding his head slightly. His face remained the same as the man picked up a large object that looked like a gun, and the three-year-old in front of him started to sob once more*

*"Keep her still," the man growled, inserting a rather large needle into the front of the gun and positioning it above her left forearm.*

*"Calm down, child," Papa ordered, running a hand over her newly-shaved head. "You must stay still, for me. Don't worry. He isn't going to hurt you."*

*The girl sniffed, stopped thrashing around, and looked at her papa, the love for him overshadowed by the fear of his disappointment. The needle touched her skin, and started to trace over her flesh, sending burning pains*



*up her arm and gathered in her chest. Her cries rose to a wail, causing the lights overhead to flicker violently, but she fought to keep still, deathly afraid of the intense pain spreading across more of her body than necessary. Her arm felt like it was on fire, as the needle ran in circles across her arm, before slashing two harsh lines into the skin.*

"El," a concerned voice broke through her memories. Jonathan was staring at her, a crease forming between his eyebrows as he studied her tense form. "Are you okay? Nervous?"

Eleven nodded, her finger still tracing the tattoo under the table, readily taking the excuse he gave her. "Nervous."

"You'll be fine," her brother assured her, turning back to the stove as the rest of their little family entered.

Even as she was surrounded by her family, she felt separate from them, the memories bringing back the fact that she was merely a strange young woman with stranger powers that had only entered their lives a little over a decade ago. There couldn't have been enough time for the Byers and the chief to fully accept her into their little family. El was desperate for Mike, whose fingers would send happy sparks, not lines of fire, through her when he traced those numbers. Mike, who she had no shortage of experience missing, and who, despite their fights as kids, was the first person to ask her to join his family.

El missed him so much, it manifested as an ache in her chest, and she was glad that she had already eaten or else she doubted she would eat anything all day. In her head, she knew that Mike was probably thinking of her, but her heart itched to call him immediately, knowing that there was a time when he would have been at her side in an instant. She took a deep breath, calming her mind and emotions, knowing that she had to handle most of today by herself.

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*From when we were the children playing in this fairground*

*Wish I was there with you now*

December 14, 1996

Mike dug through the many books and DVDs that cluttered the shelves and cubbies in the basement, a frantic energy surrounded him uncharacteristically early in the morning. Knocking his head against the side of the wooden shelf, he sat back into a crouch, clutching a large, brown book. The book itself had no title on the cover, but there were corners of photos sticking out over the edges of the pages, leaving no question as to what kind of book it was.

Smiling triumphantly, Mike opened the scrapbook, settling once more into a cross-legged position on the couch.

The first few photos his eyes landed on, were grainy, black-and-white security stills of a young girl with a shaved head, the logo of Hawkins Laboratory stamped in the bottom corner. When Chief Hopper had first shown him the footage from Eleven's time in the lab, he had seen red and wanted to tear the Hawkins Laboratory building down brick-by-brick. But, when Will showed the videos to Jonathan, the photographer had quickly found a few frames that he had then printed into pictures for Mike.

In the first, a seven-year-old El was sitting at her desk, using a frankly, pathetic supply of art supplies—according to Will—to draw a stick figure drawing of herself. Her large eyes were focused intently on her work, her tongue peeking out of the corner of her mouth.

Mike chuckled at her overly stressed expression, thinking of all the times over the years, he had seen that exact same expression on El's features whenever she was concentrating on her work or finding the right word to explain her confusion.

The second and third pictures were from the security cameras the night of November 15, 1983—the day of El's escape from Hawkins Lab. They seemed to have been taken seconds apart, one showed a seemingly empty hallway, the shadows obscuring the young girl's form from viewers (but Mike eyes immediately went to the faint outline hidden by those shadows) in the corridor that lead to the sewer grate that would take her to freedom. While the other showed, her face slowly emerging from the shadows, in fact most of it was still hidden, but he always thought that he could see a hint of joy or hope peeking through the expression of fear.

Even though the mere thought of her years at the lab would cause El to become an empty shell of herself, Mike was in awe at the bravery and strength she had as a child to have survived such an ordeal. He would never stop being impressed by her powers, and knew that her experiences had shaped her into the young woman he knew today. Mike knew it was selfish, but he would gladly shoulder her burden, and share her pain, if it meant she ended up in his life.

Flipping through pictures Jonathan had taken throughout their adolescence and teenage years, he found the one photo that wasn't exactly his favorite, but he clung to it because it managed to bring back the hope and grief and desperation felt in that moment.

The final black-and-white security photo was plastered on the very last page of the scrapbook. It was taken from a security camera in the corner of a Hawkins Middle School science classroom, on one 1983 night. El was standing, her hand outstretched towards the blackboard. A shadowy figure in the early stages of breaking up into what would be millions of pieces, surrounded her, but he could still make out El's figure despite those pieces that tried to swallow her. Although her face couldn't be seen in the photo, Mike's own features were contorted as if he were the one being ripped to pieces, his back against the wooden cabinets, and his hands were clamped over his ears, but his eyes were fixed on the shadowy mass at the blackboard even as Lucas and Dustin turned away.

Mike studied the picture in the early morning light, light that was beginning to stream through the small basement windows. It surprised even himself that he loved this picture as much as he did. Most people thought that it would merely stir up horrible memories of that week and that night, but he knew that the image captured by the camera, captured the moment he realized he was never going to forget El, and that he was determined to never stop looking for her, as long as they both lived.

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*'Cause if the whole world was watching I'd still dance with you*

December 12, 1983

Mike Wheeler fiddled with his bow tie, picking apart the tight knot

his father had tied for him, only minutes earlier. Tonight, was the first Snow Ball he was actually looking forward to going to, and had even managed to talk his friends into coming along. Although, if he was being honest, it didn't take much convincing, and Lucas had also managed to find a date to the dance.

His mother insisted on taking pictures of the gang and their dates before the dance, so he scampered down the stairs as the doorbell started to ring incessantly. Dustin, Will, and Lucas were waiting at the bottom of the stairs, dressed in a range of messy to neat, suits.

"I don't know how you talked us into this, man," Dustin complained, a broad grin on his face. "Will and I are just going to be the chaperones to your guys' date."

"It's not my fault no one wanted to go to the Snow Ball with you," Lucas retorted, as Mike's face turned bright red. "Besides, Will could have gone with Jennifer Hayes..."

"Yeah, right," Will snorted, "if I didn't shout the question at her from across the parking lot, and then immediately run away."

The four friends broke into good-hearted laughter, as each remembered that disastrous afternoon, and letting go of their nerves for a couple of minutes, completely missing the soft click of a camera as their mothers, and Jonathan crept into the room. A single, high chime cut through their mirth, silencing the four friends immediately.

"Come in, come in," Mrs. Wheeler chirped, ushering the girls into the living room. "Thank you so much Chief Hopper for dropping them off."

"It was no problem at all," came the gruff response, as the police officer entered awkwardly, tipping his hat to the mothers, before beating a hasty retreat. "I hope you all have a nice time."

Mike and Will exchanged a knowing look, when the sheriff's eyes lingered on Mrs. Byers, before he quickly turned on his heel and stomped out the door.

"Come on boys," Mrs. Byers encouraged, trying to draw attention

away from her rapidly pinkening cheeks, "these pictures aren't going to take themselves."

Dustin groaned loudly, but quickly placed himself in the middle of the room, so he would be in the center of every picture. Not wanting to be left on the edges, Lucas grabbed his date's hand and tugged her towards their spot to the left of Dustin. Will was next, quickly moving towards the other side of Lucas, earning himself a glare from Dustin as it looked like he might be left on the edges after all.

"Where do we stand?" El asked, her wide, hazel eyes staring questioningly at Mike.

"Here," he maneuvered the two of them over towards Dustin's free side, gingerly taking her hand once they were in position.

The next ten minutes were filled with coos and even a few tears from their moms, as Jonathan snapped away on his camera, taking picture after picture as the friends jockeyed to be at the center of the line, and simply enjoyed being on their way to what was sure to be the best Snow Ball ever.

Mike shyly opened the door for El, his face turning an alarming shade of red that made his freckles disappear in a sea of crimson when she gave him a sweet smile and her light pink—nearly white—dress brushed his legs as she climbed into the car. He was tempted to childishly stick out his tongue at his friends, who immediately started to tease him about his red cheeks and sudden shyness, but managed to control himself.

After a blur of a car ride, their little group was at the middle school, and Mike was leading El towards the gym.

"Wait," she whispered, tugging on the short strands that were starting to cover her forehead and neck, as if to hide her face. "Mike..."

He waved his hand at his friends, shaking his head sharply when the boys started to move to crowd around El. "We'll catch up later," he hissed, turning concerned eyes to his date. "El, what's wrong?"

"The Snow Ball, it's in the gym." She stated, her eyes darting from the

gym doors to lock onto Mike's, knowing that he would understand what she was worried about.

"Yeah, but you'll barely be able to recognize it," Mike comforted, squeezing her hand tightly. "There's usually lots of decorations, like paper snowflakes or blue and white streamers, that cover the walls and ceiling, so it doesn't look like a gym anymore."

El nodded, desperately wanting to see the winter scenery she now knew laid beyond the gym doors. Not a kiddie-pool that would let her see into the Darkness.

Mike pushed the doors open, turning just in time to see her mouth drop open, and her eyes widen, as she saw the decorated gym for the first time. The decorations weren't very fancy, sheets of construction paper covered the walls and the disco lights flashed intermittently and in no discernible pattern, but El was staring at the gym as if it was an actual Winter Wonderland.

"Pretty," she declared, her face breaking out into a wide smile, the first genuine one she had given since her weeks in the Upside-Down.

"Really pretty," Mike replied, gazing instead at El's overjoyed face. Her face was filling out but her hazel eyes still managed to stand out, and her dark brown hair kept falling in her eyes. Filled with an inexplicable surge of courage, Mike brushed the strands of hair behind her ear, causing her to turn and look at him, confusion plain on her face. "You...you look...*you're* really pretty, El."

She blushed lightly, but didn't turn away like some girls would, but instead, took the hand that had dropped back to his side and led him out onto the dance floor just as a slow song started playing.

He tripped over his feet a few times, before beginning to sway in time with the music, still holding El's hand. Glancing around at other couples, spotting Lucas and his date dancing close together only a few feet away, he turned back to El, "Like this." He placed her hands on his shoulders, before moving his to her waist. They stayed like that for the rest of the song, barely even noticing when the music ended and a more fast-paced song took its place.

The music suddenly filled his ears, turning into a cacophony of screeches and undefinable sounds as he sank to his knees, his hands clutching his ears, and his face twisted in pain. "What...what's happening?" He shouted, but everyone else didn't seem to notice the noise, continuing to dance and laugh as if nothing was wrong. "El! El, what's going on?" Mike pleaded, looking up at the telekinetic girl, her face set in a mask of neutrality. She clearly couldn't see what was happening to him, and kept staring at the spot where he had been standing only seconds earlier.

A wordless scream echoed, first throughout the suddenly empty gymnasium, and then throughout Mike's bedroom.

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*Drive highways and byways to be there with you*

December 12, 1983

Mike punched his pillow, unshed tears clouding his vision as his dream played on a seemingly never-ending loop in his mind. The dance had seemed so real...El had seemed so real. *But she's not coming back*, he harshly reminded himself, grinding his teeth together. *She's lost in the Upside-Down, she broke her promise and she isn't coming back.*

Unable to get comfortable again, constantly haunted by the vision of El, smiling and laughing as they danced at the non-existent Snow Ball, Mike threw back the covers and got out of bed. He tugged on a sweatshirt and his sneakers, stoutly ignoring the suit hanging in the back of his closet, before he snuck out of his room and down the stairs to the garage.

Despite the fact that he was still wearing his pajama pants, he unlocked his bike, and walked it out of the garage and down the street, before hopping on and pedaling furiously away from his house. The wind stung his eyes, causing tears to build up until he was practically riding blind through the streets of Hawkins.

*She has to be out there, she has to be*, Mike repeated to himself as he sped towards Mirkwood, and the abandoned Hawkins Laboratory. The streetlamps became blurs and the houses were merely shapes in the dark, before giving way to the trees that bordered Mirkwood.

Hopping off the bike, he walked it into the thicket of trees until he was far enough into the wood that he could continue to bike, the wheels plowing a path through the dead grass. As the chain-link fence surrounding the laboratory came into his view, there was only one thought in his head: the gate had to be inside.

He circled the lab for at least an hour, becoming more and more frustrated with each pass, unable to find a way inside. Mike pushed his bike towards the barrier, in a futile attempt to punch a hole through, but it merely fell on its side with a dull *crunch*.

Mike glared at the building, angry that its continued existence—and his inability to find a way inside—meant that El potentially survived her fight with the Demogorgon, but he was powerless to find her. Just as he was useless to save her from such a fate in the first place.

The dull whirr of an engine broke through his thoughts, spurring him to action. Not wanting to be caught by however many bad men were returning to the facility, he yanked his bike upright before riding off in the opposite direction, no real destination on his mind, just towards El.

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*Over and over the only truth*

*Everything comes back to you*

December 12, 1983

It didn't take Mike long to figure out that he was on the path to the quarry's cliff, the site of one of the last times he truly relied on El alone to save him.

During most of the week he knew her, he was always trying to protect her, whether it was from the bad men or from discovery by his parents. Yet, there were many times when her telekinesis saved their party more effectively and in more ways than he could have ever protected her.

He skidded to a stop, dropping his bike a few yards from the edge of the cliff, as he walked right to the short outcropping that overlooked



the canyon. Mike stared at the bottom of the cliff, shivering as the cold December air bit through his sweatshirt, and there was a brief flash of realization as he remembered that it was winter and he had been riding around Hawkins in nothing but a sweatshirt and pajamas for hours.

Shaking his head, as if that would clear his head of those cautionary thoughts, he inched closer to the edge, his hands balling into fists and his dark eyes fixed intently on one point at the bottom of the canyon. His breath came in shorter pants as he stuck his toes over the edge of the cliff. The day Mike jumped off this very same ledge to stop Troy, it wasn't just to save Dustin—although that was a large part of his motivation. There was an irrational, probably half-crazed, part of his mind that saw it as a way to find El, so he could apologize for his harsh words the day before, words that had made her run away. He had been so certain that she would save him, he didn't even scream when he fell through the air. And when he was pushed back towards solid ground as she advanced on Troy and James, he had never been in more awe of her.

*She could save me again*, he thought, and for one frighteningly long minute, he seriously considered just stepping off the cliff's edge. It was an action that would either end with El saving him one more time, or with an emptiness that meant he didn't have to feel the pain that stabbed him in the chest every day he had to spend not looking for her. It seemed like a win-win scenario.

The full implications of his jump hit him like one of Troy's sucker punches to his gut. He was seriously considering suicide on the off-chance he could see El again. The thought that he had brought himself to such a low state, and that he knew El would be terrified if she read his thoughts, caused him to scramble back from the ledge, tears leaking out of his eyes. Sobs wracked his body, and he ran his hands over his face, pulling at his inky hair. Tears splattered the dusty road, streaming down his face in rivers, and showed no sign of stopping. El's disappearance had eaten away at Mike in the month or so following her disappearance, but he had clung to the hope that she would not break her promise to go with him to the Snow Ball. "Promise" meant so much to her, and yet, he had gone to the dance the other night, and she had not reappeared. It crushed him to admit

it, and the mere shadow of the thought caused a fresh wave of tears and physical pain, but in the back of his mind, he knew that if she didn't find a way back in time for the Snow Ball, it was highly unlikely El was coming back at all.

He cried at the cliff's edge until there were no more tears to fall, and the sound of dry sobs filled the night. When he felt steady enough to stand without pitching over the cliff to his death, the sun was starting to rise on the horizon. Mike sluggishly pulled his bike upright, weighed down by his aching heart, and rode back into town, prepared to take whatever scolding or lecture his mother was sure to give him once he was home. She could make him feel guilty or sorry for sneaking out, but it would barely register, compared to the numbing depression he felt, having finally accepted that El was never coming back. *But if she does*, he vowed, *I'm never letting her go. I won't let you go again. I swear that to you, El. Promise.*

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**A/N: Okay! So that's Chapter One, the whole fic is pretty much a mix of fluff and angst, and this chapter was definitely more angsty, but I hope you enjoyed it nonetheless! Please review as I'm always open to constructive criticism. I'll definitely try uploading the rest within the next couple of weeks, on Thursdays, if you want to follow/favorite!**

## 2. Prom Night

A/N: Hey, so I know this is really late, but I had a lot to do today and this week and it is still *technically* Stranger Thursday so here is the second chapter to "This Town"! Be prepared, it's a long one :)

Thank you so much to everyone who has followed and favorited this story just from one chapter, I really, truly, appreciate you all! A special shout-out to MeetMeAtTheQuarry for being my first and only reviewer for this fic!

Enjoy!

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*I saw that you moved on with someone new*

December 30, 1987

El Byers felt incredibly tense, and not for any immediately apparent reason. Any outsider would just see a teenage girl running an errand for her parents to the local grocery store. She absentmindedly pulled her knit hat lower over her forehead and tried to hide herself in the bulkiness of her coat. She trudged towards the sliding doors, across the snow covered parking lot, hoping that the managers wouldn't remember a girl with a shaved head who destroyed the store a few years previously. El had begged Will to go in her place but he was going to be out with Dustin and Lucas the whole afternoon, which left only her to run the errands, since Jonathan was only back home for a week for winter break and wanted to catch up with old friends.

Clutching the list from Mrs. By—Mom, she corrected her thoughts—she meandered through the aisles, looking for the listed items. As the amount of groceries piled up in her arms, she struggled to see around the stack of boxes and bottles. El was desperately looking for a cart, as the items started growing heavier, and she was debating using her powers to lighten the load, when she abruptly hit another solid object and fell to the ground.

"Oh my gosh," an unfamiliar feminine voice gushed. "Baby, are you

okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," groaned a much more familiar voice. "Are you o..." Mike trailed off when he noticed the brunette girl sitting on the ground surrounded by boxes of Eggos, soda bottles, and bags of chips.

El felt tears quickly form in her eyes, and felt her face heat up at the embarrassment of literally running into Mike, who was once again witness to her naivete about normal human customs. She snuck a look at Mike, whose unruly dark hair was being flattened by a pretty, blonde girl, whom she knew was in their year at school.

"I'm so sorry," the blonde girl turned to El, sticking out her hand as if to help the girl off the ground. "I'm always telling him that he's too distracted and of course he manages to run into the only other person in the aisle!"

El allowed the girl to take her hand and gingerly lift her off the tile floor. When she turned her gaze to Mike, choosing to ignore the sweetness of the girl, he immediately ducked his head to hide his reddening cheeks and scrambled to help pick up her groceries.

"Here you go, El," he mumbled, practically shoving the items into her arms, but El was so shocked, that many of the boxes tumbled out of her numb arms.

"Wait," the blonde drew out the word, her smile settling into a frown, "do you already know her?"

Mike nodded sheepishly, gesturing towards the sixteen-year-old who was attempting to hide behind her long, brown hair. "Cathy, this is my ex, Elev—El Byers."

The girl's—Cathy's—face became measured, as if she was trying incredibly hard to keep her expression pleasant and neutral. "Cathy Burges, nice to meet you."

El kept staring at her feet, hoping that she could keep the tears from falling if she didn't look up, but she did stick her hand out to shake the other girl's. "Nice to meet you too," she echoed, her voice

sounding hollow, even to her own ears.

"Is all of this for the New Year's Eve party?" Mike interjected, obviously trying to diffuse the tension. "That's pretty funny because we're actually here looking for stuff to bring too. Are you, um, going to be there?"

El nodded mutely, feeling the familiar sting of tears and the lump in her throat preventing her from speaking clearly. She mustered the courage to raise her face and glance at the couple standing before her. Cathy was looking up at Mike with confusion on her face, but it was clear that there was affection lying underneath her expression, and as she watched, Mike grabbed his girlfriend's hand, subtly pulling her closer, while steadfastly refusing to meet El's eyes. Just as she felt the tears finally start to fall, she bent down, scooped up the forgotten groceries, and started for the exit.

"El..." she heard Mike call her name, probably wondering why she was retreating so quickly, but El refused to turn back.

She quickly paid for the items, trying to keep a mask of normalcy in place for the cashier, but once she was outside, she broke out into a run, never slowing until she reached her house.

Flinging the door open, she tore through the house, dumping the bags on the kitchen table with a loud clunk! El ignored the questioning looks from her brothers, who had looked over from playing their Atari game at the noise—if *they were planning on getting home early why did I still have to go to the store?*, she wanted to scream at them—and ran to her room, using her powers to slam and lock the door behind her.

She sobbed into her pillow, the pain of seeing the boy she cared for more than anyone else, content with another was almost too much to bear. Their break-up had been messy, as anyone could attest who had witnessed it—and sadly, many people had—and El felt the sting of his words cut through her heart on a daily basis. It was the most painful experience of her new life when she had lost the one person who made her feel safe, and warm, but seeing Mike again—with his girlfriend nonetheless—was not very far behind.

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*In the pub that we met he's got his arms around you*

December 31, 1987

"El!" Her mom called from the living room. "Are you ready to go sweetie?"

"I'll be right there," the teenager responded, as she looked over her reflection, scrunching her nose at her appearance. Her brown hair seemed dull, and hung a few inches past her shoulders in loose curls that seemingly refused to be tamed. Even as she grew up and her face became defined, she continued to think that her hazel eyes were too big for her face. The large, white sweater she wore, nearly swallowed up her "dainty"—as her mom always praised—curves, while her hand-me-down jeans from Nancy needed to be rolled up several times in order to fit properly. She felt too small, even though all of her girl friends were jealous of her petite size, and too skinny, feeling that the year of malnourishment in the Upside-Down, and a childhood of abuse, had stunted her physical growth to a rate much slower than perhaps what was normal.

Sighing one more time at her reflection, El made her way to the living room, where her family was waiting with sympathetic looks on their faces.

"You don't have to go," her mom reminded quietly, brushing a curl behind her adoptive daughter's ear.

"I'm gonna' kill that Wheeler kid," the chief growled, but El knew he wasn't being serious when he flashed her a sad grin.

"Let's go," El said, smiling at Will's overenthusiastic gestures towards the door.

The family of five piled into the chief's truck, El finding herself crammed in the backseat in between Will and Jonathan. She listened contentedly to the family's lighthearted bickering over the radio station, and as Joyce finally settled on one still playing Christmas music, the Wheeler's large house came into view. Warm yellow light spilled from the house's many windows onto the lawn, and she could see people milling about inside, even catching a glimpse of Nancy

and Steve talking sweetly together in the corner. The short walk from the parked car to the doorstep was a chilly one, and El started counting her steps to keep her mind off of the cold air that whipped through her sweater. She had left so distractedly that she hadn't even remembered to bring a coat.

"Happy New Year's!" Mrs. Wheeler greeted, a wide smile on her face, opening the door and pulling El's mom into a hug.

"Happy New Year's, Karen," the Byers mother replied, awkwardly trying to keep a tray of cookies from plummeting to the ground.

Mrs. Wheeler ushered the family inside, graciously taking the tray from the other woman despite the fact that the cookies looked like small lumps of charcoal.

"Sorry Mrs. Wheeler," Jonathan apologized quietly, noticing the brief flash of horror on her face, as he drifted off to say hello to Nancy, Steve, and a few other of their friends. "I'm only really good at making breakfast food."

"No problem at all," she set the tray on the counter and turned to teenagers who were looking anxiously around the crowded living room for their friends. "The boys and Cathy are downstairs, if that's who you're looking for."

"Thank you, Mrs. Wheeler!" Will and El chimed in unison, making a quick getaway to the basement's door, not seeing the sad look the two mothers fixed on the brunette girl's back.

The two Byers heard their friends before they saw them, since Dustin's criticism of the New Year's television program could've been heard in New York, while Lucas was loudly having an argument with Mike over what the best movie had been that year

"Guys!" Will shouted, trying to cut through the deafening chatter for a moment. "Sorry we're late."

"It's fine, Byers," Mike said, turning back to his argument with Lucas, "as long as you tell Lucas here that *Spaceballs* was the funniest movie this year!"

"No way," Lucas protested, throwing his hands up in apparent disbelief, "*Nightmare on Elm Street* is the best horror movie to come out in the past couple years."

Will just smirked, settling on the floor next to Dustin, grabbing a handful of chips from the bowl on top of the D&D table, clearly enjoying the scene two of his best friends were making.

El stood on the bottom step, for a minute or so more, merely observing the room and trying to figure out where she fit in. A year or so ago, she was sitting next to Mike, cuddled into his side...but, as she painfully reminded herself, that was not where she fit anymore. In fact, Cathy waved at her, the blonde in that exact position next to Mike, and patted the seat on her other side.

"I don't know how you did it," Cathy gushed, curling one hand around Mike's arm, an action that made El narrow her eyes imperceptibly, "being friends with all of them for so long. I mean I would have been so annoyed with all the bickering after the first week, that I would have just gone to find some girls to be friends with. Just for the sake of normalcy for a bit."

El nodded her agreement, not really understanding why Cathy was so angry at the boy's banter. To her, it was just what friends did. They argued with one another about stupid things, and although they did seem to legitimately get mad at each other, it was just their way of having a conversation. She had seen what could happen when the boys got into real fights, and this constant bickering was certainly not that. "Well, there is Max," El replied, remembering the red-headed tomboy who had become part of their little group during her time... away, but she had quickly become fast friends with after her return.

"Yeah," Cathy conceded, "but she's not that girly, you know? She's not someone that you can talk about boys with or do each other's hair. Speaking of which, I would *kill* to have curls like yours! Do you curl your hair or are you just lucky?"

Tucking a stray hair behind her ear, El blushed, wondering why anyone would think her curly brown hair looked any better than Cathy's pin-straight blonde strands. "It's just like this. I think your hair is so much prettier."



"Aww, you're too sweet," Cathy fluffed her own hair proudly, before leaning in to whisper conspiratorially. "I'm sure I don't have to tell you that I would just love it, if Mike were to say something like that from time to time."

El stamped down the surge of jealousy that rose at the reminder that the girl next to her was dating her ex. Selfishly, she thought about telling the blonde about all of the times Mike had twirled a curl around his finger, or combed through her hair, or just said how much he loved the exact color of brown her hair was. "He really is awful at compliments like that," El replied, glancing up at Mike before turning to look Cathy right in the eyes. She didn't want her words to lead to any fights between the two.

"Max!" Dustin cried suddenly, running up to the red-headed girl who was still on the step above the floor as he twirled her around in a massive hug.

"Calm down, you Wookiee," the girl quipped, but El secretly saw Max hide a pleased smile and self-consciously run a hand through her hair. "Put me down, it's time for the countdown."

The group gathered around the TV, and El couldn't help but feel like she was merely a fly on the wall, watching her friends welcome a new year. Mike had his arm wrapped around Cathy, and although the girl had made an effort to include El, it was obvious that her full attention was on Mike, whenever he was near. Dustin and Max had been dancing around their feelings for one another for years, but they were standing close together as well, chanting along with the countdown. Lucas and Will were across the semi-circle, and she could tell that they were shooting her concerned glances in between their recap of their latest outing to the arcade, where Will had apparently ended up alone in a photo booth with Jennifer Hayes.

"Happy New Year!" The room erupted in cheers, and El was startled by the loud noise, so lost in her thoughts that she had missed the entire countdown.

She was well-aware of the tradition of kissing a loved one on New Year's, "to start the year off with something good," Mike had explained to her years ago, so she quickly turned away from the lip-

locked couple. El smiled to herself when she saw Max grab Dustin by the shirt and pull him down into a fiery kiss.

"Happy New Year, El!" The loud voices of her friends rang in her ears, making her tense her shoulders slightly, before relaxing as Lucas and Will pressed friendly kisses to her cheeks.

"Happy New Year," she returned the sentiment, wrapping her two friends into a tight hug, letting the prospect of a new year fill her mind with hope that it would be a better one than the year that had just ended.

---

*It's so hard*

*So hard*

January 1, 1988

"Happy New Year!" Six teenagers screamed in unison, turning to embrace one another, and Mike didn't hesitate to plant a kiss on his girlfriend's lips.

Cathy responded eagerly, running her hands through his hair, and he looped an arm around her waist, tugging her even closer. However, he couldn't help but notice—like he always did—that her cinnamon scent permeated all of his senses, he could even taste the heaviness of it on his tongue.

Mike was the first to pull away, unable to take the cinnamon-laced kiss for much longer, or to push what it was like to kiss El out of his mind.

El. He had been doing a decent job at avoiding his ex-girlfriend since their break-up, certain that if he had seen her again in those early months, he would have tried to get her back, which could have only ended in disaster. Mike had known that he would need to move on, in order to give her the chance to move on. So, he had gone and asked out the blonde girl who had been flirting with him for months in science class, and him and Cathy had been a couple ever since. But the past two days had been like a punch in the gut, because it

brought all of his buried emotions back to the surface. He always knew that he would never be over El, no matter how far they drifted apart, but seeing her standing on the step, in her cuffed jeans and with her curls spilling over her oversize sweater, made him realize how much he wanted to go over to her and pour all of his regret and pain into a kiss.

A tug on his arm, brought him out of his El-centered reverie, immediately bringing a wave of guilt washing over him, as he stared into the bright blue eyes of his girlfriend.

"What's up?" He asked casually, unable to keep El out of the corner of his eye.

"I thought it would be weird, us being the only couple here, but I guess not," she joked, pointing to where Max and Dustin were still wrapped up in their New Year's kiss. They were so into each other that it seemed like there wasn't anyone else in the room, and Mike smirked when he saw Dustin's favorite hat lying on the floor.

"Gross!" Lucas pretended to gag when he caught sight of his two friends still locked in a passionate kiss. "Cut it out you guys!"

Reluctantly, Max and Dustin finally broke apart, her face turning a shade of red so bright that it matched her hair, but neither looked particularly embarrassed or regretful.

"Come on, it's not like we don't always see Mike and Cathy sucking face," Dustin retorted, gesturing one of his arms wildly, the other remaining wrapped around Max's shoulders.

The shift in the room was immediately obvious. Max slapped the back of Dustin's head, jerking her head towards the curly-haired girl that was now, suddenly and without warning, the center of attention. Lucas shook his head, in complete disbelief at his friend. Cathy blushed, possessively snaking her hand around Mike's forearm, a sly grin coming over her face, reaching up to give her boyfriend a proud kiss on his lips. On the other hand, all of the blood seemed to drain from Mike's face, leaving his freckles standing out even more prominently than usual, and when he pulled back from the kiss, he glanced over to El, who seemed to be frozen in her place. *If someone*

*was to look at her right now*, Mike thought, trying hard not to study her features, *they would have no idea what she's feeling*. Her face was set like a stone, as if she was one of those famous Greek statues, like she was some powerful goddess wondering if mankind was worth her time. Will glared in turn at Dustin, then Mike, before his gaze softened when he caught sight of his sister.

"El..."

Her head snapped up, clearly not expecting Mike to be the one to break the awkward tension in the air. In fact, Mike was surprised to hear his own voice, expecting Will to be the one to comfort El. He knew he was probably the last person she wanted to hear from, but he couldn't stop himself from trying to reach out when he saw that much hurt in her expressive eyes. Mike wanted to tell her how much he missed her, how much he hated himself for causing her so much pain. Mostly, he wanted to tell her how unhappy he was with Cathy, and how much he still lo—cared about her.

But, the words stuck in his throat when he felt Cathy tug on his arm, looking up at him with confusion and a thinly veiled mask of jealousy. He let her brother go and ask if she was okay, and plastered a ridiculously fake smile on his face, when she assured Will she was.

*And I want to tell you everything*

December 14, 1996

His mother always made breakfast for the family on Saturday mornings, and Mike wasn't about to break tradition. So, when he smelled the comforting smell of eggs and bacon radiating down the stairs, he immediately jumped up and dashed up the stairs.

"Morning, Mom," he greeted, taking the proffered plate she had made him.

"Your friends are going to be over in a few minutes so eat up," she said, turning back to the stove, but he still saw her wipe the tears away with the. "Everyone else seems like they're going to sleep in today, so don't make too much noise."

Mike hummed his assent through a mouthful of eggs, devouring the rest of his breakfast in five minutes flat. Although he wasn't sure if it was the nerves or his hunger that made him eat so quickly.

The doorbell rang about fifteen times in a row, and Mike rolled his eyes at his friends' continued child-like behavior. *Well into our twenties and they're still acting like twelve-year-olds*, he thought, but then reconsidered his train of thought, when he remembered that he had been reading the old Dungeons & Dragons binder only a few hours earlier.

Opening the door led to a cacophony of shouts and cheers from the three young men standing there, and Mike quickly shushed them, a smile on his face. "Calm down you guys. People are still sleeping here."

"Sorry," Will apologized, giving Mike a quick hug, before the friends made their way to the basement.

"How can people sleep?" Dustin exclaimed, not bothering to lower his voice at all and throwing his arm around Mike's shoulders. "It's not every day that Mike Wheeler..."

"Shut up!" The other three shouted, their voices overlapping one another and drowning out the end of Dustin's sentence.

"Boys!" A warning shout came from the top of the stairs, as Mrs. Wheeler managed to make four, fully-grown young men feel like adolescents with one word.

"Sorry, Mrs. Wheeler," came the chorus of Will, Dustin, and Lucas.

"Sorry Mom," Mike called back, his face burning red. "We'll be quiet now."

The four friends heard the basement door shut quietly, and they all exhaled in unison, like they had so many times when they were kids.

"Nothing has really changed, has it?" Lucas remarked, looking at the basement. Everything seemed cleaner than they were used to, but all of their movies were stacked in the same order, the D&D box sat proudly on top of the table they were all too big to sit at anymore.

"Nothing except us," Will said sagely, gesturing lightheartedly to the shorter haircut he now sported, instead of the classic "Byers bowl cut."

"I don't know," Mike shook his head, "that is definitely what Will the Wise would've said."

That seemed to break the tension, and the friends dissolved into laughter, starting to retell stories of their old campaigns—both fictional and not—faltering only when they got to the infamous Demogorgon, but a curt nod from Mike reinvigorated the storytelling. They soon lapsed into silence, each reminiscing about the time they had all spent in this very basement. At some point, they had gravitated to their old seats at the D&D table, as if they were just about to start whatever new campaign Mike had cooked up.

"Dudes," Dustin piped up, a wide smile coming over his still-somewhat chubby cheeks. "I first kissed Max right over there. Remember? It was New Year's Eve, junior year..."

"We don't need a play-by-play," Lucas interrupted, punching him in the arm.

"Besides, that was kind of an awkward experience for everyone else," Will reminded them. "At least Mike and El were never that gross."

"Especially not that year," Mike said, unable to stop a bitter edge to creep into his voice. "Do you guys really not remember? We had broken up by then."

"Oh yeah," Lucas sighed, "you were with Katie then, right?"

"Cathy," Will snapped, shooting Mike a fairly harsh glare. As good-natured as he could be, Will had never really forgiven his friend for breaking his sister's heart.

Mike nodded sullenly, fully accepting his friend's righteous distrust. "It was a thoroughly awkward night. El had come too, remember? She had to see me and Cathy..."

"Sucking face," Dustin supplied. He shook his head, as if he didn't believe his own thoughts. "Why the hell did you think it would be a

good idea to break up with El?"

Mike's cheeks burned under the scrutiny of his friends' gazes, wishing they could just forget the last few minutes and go back to talking about D&D. "I don't know," he muttered, an obvious lie to everyone in the room, staring at his hands.

"Yeah, that was a pretty dumb move. She was the only one who thought your teenage self was not awkward as hell," Lucas teased, giving the dark-haired boy a playful nudge with his elbow. He was clearly worried about his friend being sucked into the past, as had happened so many times over the years whenever the break-up was mentioned. Although the three boys had been there to witness what had happened right before he dumped her, no matter how many times they put their heads together, they could never figure out Mike's definitive reasons for the break-up.

"I might be biased, but I've always said she was the best thing to happen to you," Will remarked with a grin.

*She certainly was*, Mike thought, stealing a glance back to the corner where a blanket fort once stood—the most obvious change to the basement itself.

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*The words I never got to say the first time around*

February 13, 1987

The hallways of Hawkins High School were plastered with red, pink, and white streamers, and many girls had decorated their lockers with paper hearts. Since Valentine's Day was going to be on a Saturday this year, many of the couples were taking today to give sappy displays of their relationships for the whole school to see.

In the back of his mind, Mike was thinking of where he was going to take El for their Valentine's Day-day out. Taking her to the arcade seemed too simple, but what else was there to do in the winter? Besides it had snowed the other day so they wasn't really any incentive to going outside...unless he could make a makeshift dance... His thoughts trailed off as he fought his way through the

cloyingly romantic atmosphere, finally yanking his locker open, only it to be violently slammed closed, and he counted himself lucky that it only banged the back of his hand.

He sucked in a sharp intake of breath through his teeth, cradling his numb fingers, before turning to face his usual tormentor. "What do you want Troy? Don't you have a bridge to vandalize or something?"

"Watch your mouth, Frogface," the bully hissed, shoving Mike's shoulder back into the locker. "I didn't know you could be brave when you don't have all of your little friends to hide behind."

Mike cringed—Troy would never let him live down the year when he had let Lucas, Dustin, and Will try to stand up to Troy, when he wouldn't—the memories ached every time he heard someone call Dustin "Toothless" or trip Will on the way to his bike, and braced himself for the next blow. When one didn't seem imminent, he started to walk away, desperate to get to his Physics class without any further humiliation.

"No smart-ass comeback, huh?" Troy growled, his voice raising so the entire hallway could hear him now. "God, you're such a coward, Frogface," he scoffed loudly.

He quickly saw that nearly everyone in the hallway had stopped talking and were simply watching the two of them. "Get some new insults Troy," Mike stopped walking, but didn't turn around, "they're getting a little repetitive."

Troy's face burned red, and he opened and closed his mouth several times, clearly unable to think up an original taunt.

Mike smirked triumphantly, making his way through the crowd towards the classroom, expecting to receive a fist bump or two, and pats on the back from his friends as he passed, but everyone was staring in horror at the purple-faced and enraged bully.

"You should probably get out of here," Lucas hissed, shoving him in the other direction, his fists raised as if he was about to *physically* fight Troy. "Dude, like *now!*"



The dark-haired boy barely had time to say 'huh' before he was yanked backwards by his backpack strap and practically put into a headlock by the much stronger bully.

"You and your little friends think you're so clever don't you, Wheeler?" Troy snarled, his arms tightening and constricting Mike's air supply. He spoke so menacingly but quiet enough that no one but Mike could hear his words. "You thought no one would notice that the freak you three brought to school, the freak who *broke my arm*, had reappeared right under our noses. It doesn't matter if she's got blonde hair, or no hair, or even brown curls," he paused letting Mike ponder the full implications of his words, before unleashing Mike's worst nightmare, "*I know who she is*, and I know who can lock her up again."

That pushed him over the edge, and anger surged through his veins as he twisted out of the headlock. He tripped over his own feet, scrambling to get back to the safety of anonymity, but Troy wasn't done with him yet.

"Now that I'm thinking about it, how could she actually be in to you?" Troy taunted, as only to clarify just exactly whom he knew the telekinetic girl to be. "Frogface Wheeler, President of the A.V. Club. There's no way *any girl*—and especially not one that hot—would date you."

"Shut up Troy," Mike turned around, the words shot through him, and he froze, his entire body becoming rigid and the color draining from his face. But as he faced his lifelong bully, his dark eyes blazing with anger, and his hands were balled into fists.

"Come on, it's not like everyone here isn't thinking it," he continued, gesturing at the throng of observers that had built up since the start of their confrontation. "How much are you paying her?"

With barely a sound leaving his lips, Mike launched himself at the bully, arms flailing wildly. He managed to knock the larger boy to ground, and began to land an onslaught of punches to Troy's torso. He felt arms—probably Lucas and Dustin—try to pull him off the bully, while he heard Will yelling incoherently about El—but her name only fueled his punches. Troy took a momentary pause in his

attack, to flip the situation, and slam Mike into the ground, punching his stomach repeatedly before switching the focus of the attacks to his face. Mike tried to move his arms up to shield his face, but that proved fairly ineffective against the stronger boy.

"Break it up!" The booming voice of the principal literally cut through the crowd, all of whom immediately started running down the hallway to their classes, leaving the two brawling teenagers out in the open. The principal held the two of them by their collars, an arms-length from each other, and shoved them in opposite directions. "Grow up, and get to class."

Mike stalked toward the bathroom, and as each breath expanded in his chest, he felt a sharp ache that radiated through his body. He tasted blood from a split lip and knew that his face was probably bruised beyond an acceptable amount for an "accident." Which meant he would have to tell his mom about the fight and even worse...

"Mike," El's soft voice matched the soft hand she reached out to stop him. He had been so distracted by his own self-pity that he didn't even notice his girlfriend standing at her locker, which he had just stalked past. "What happened? Did Troy—?"

"Let go," he growled, his face burning with shame and his eyes stinging with tears that were building up. Her hand immediately retracted, as if he had burned her, of course, making him feel terrible, which in turn fueled his self-hatred at the fact that he could hurt her so deeply.

"W-what's wrong?" Her lower lip trembled as he took his anger at Troy and himself out on her. "Is there anything I can..."

"No!" He shouted, turning to glare at her. When he looked at her, all he could see was the beauty in her large eyes, in her brown-gold curls, and all of the taunts and threats from Troy flared white-hot in his mind. "What is wrong with you?"

El's eyes widened, tears beginning to fall down her cheeks in black rivers. She shrank away from his advancing fury, clutching her arms to her chest, yet she refused to look away from him.

"You could have any guy at this school, so why date me, huh? Is this just out of pity 'cause I'm such a-a-a *geek*?" Mike practically spat out the last word, right before another, more horrifying thought dawned on him. "Or just because you don't know *how* to break up with me?" He took a deep breath, choosing not to think too hard about what he was about to say, before staring El directly in the eyes, his voice hard and cutting.

"Well, this is how it's done. We're. Through."

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*And I remember everything*

February 13, 1987

El practically skipped through the hall, mildly curious as to why the corridor was practically deserted, but she had learned not to question the strange circumstances that occurred during a normal day at high school. She quickly twirled the combination lock on her locker, depositing some of her books, and plucking the folder for her next few classes out of the meticulously organized locker. Glancing at the mirror she had hung on the door, she ran her fingers through her curly hair and studied the outfit she had carefully picked out for Valentine's Day. Mike always surprised her on the day with flowers, and they would bike or walk around Hawkins—no matter the temperature—just enjoying each other's company, but she secretly hoped that he would make some gesture during the school day, like she had seen so many other couples do today.

A thunderous roar echoed through the hallway, and her head whipped up, her eyes darting frantically between the ends of the hallway. A wave of kids sprinting through the hall crashed over her, and she flattened herself against the wall of lockers, mentally pushing against the stampede of teenagers.

The crowd passed quickly, and she wiped the small trail of blood underneath her nose, cringing at the start of the headache building behind her eyes. Checking the hallway for any more sudden stampedes, she started to make her way towards her classroom. A familiar head of dark hair was moving steadily closer, and her heart leapt in her chest...before plummeting when she saw his bruised face

and split lip.

"Mike," she called out to him, laying what she hoped to be a comforting hand on his forearm, effectively stopping him in his tracks. She wanted to move a hand to cup his cheek, but the darkness in his eyes made her pause. "What happened? Did Troy—?"

"Let go," he barked harshly, still refusing to meet her eyes.

Those two words shot straight to the pit of her stomach, and she snapped her hand back to her side. She felt her lip begin to wobble as she thought, *I must have done something wrong, normal girls must not do that.* "W-what's wrong? Is there anything I can..."

"No!" He turned to yell at her, his face a twisted mask of rage. "What is wrong with you?"

It felt like all of the air had been sucked out of her lungs and she felt tears start to well up and spill from her eyes. El felt like she was twelve years old once more, hiding behind a fire truck or standing in a junkyard, and she felt her heart being ripped out of her chest as she failed the one person who truly mattered to her. The tears surged, and she had to imagine what a mess she looked like, with her mascara running down her face and her arms curling into her chest, as if she wanted to be as small as possible.

Her lack of response only seemed to inflame his anger even more, and he flung his arms into the air, his eyes narrowing contemptuously in her direction. "You could have had any guy at this school, so why date me, huh? Is this just out of pity 'cause I'm such a-a-a geek? Or just because you don't know *how* to break up with me?"

El managed to hold back another wave of tears at his cruel words. *Why doesn't he think that I love him?* She asked herself, as another stab of pain when she realized that she would never get to tell him how much she loved him. *Is he going to...?*

He raised his sharp eyes to meet her teary ones, and when he spoke, El didn't recognize the cool tone of his voice. "Well, this is how it's done. We're. Through."

She shook her head emphatically, covering her mouth with her hand as silent sobs wracked her body. Teens were starting to glance out the classroom door due to the shouting, and their gazes seemed to stab her torso with hundreds of invisible knives. Unable to look at the boy who was casting her so callously aside for a second longer, El turned and ran blindly through the halls until she found a girl's bathroom. El's knees gave out when she caught sight of her reflection, and she managed to make it into a stall before she broke down into chest-wracking tears.

She hardly cried in the years since the Upside-Down, and only when she had a particularly awful nightmare about that place, but today she cried and cried, until there seemed like she had rid her entire body of every kind of fluid that could be used as tears. El leaned her suddenly aching forehead against the coolness of the tile wall, as the reality of the conversation crashed over her. Before she could dwell on the consequences, she heard the door open and shut quickly.

"El," Max called softly as she gently knocked on the stall door, "can I come in?"

"Yes," she replied, using her abilities to unlock the door, to reveal the red-headed tomboy.

"Oh El," her friend breathed, immediately crouching next to her, and placing a sympathetic hand on her back. Max was normally not a very touchy-feely person, preferring to keep her distance or turn the other way when a particularly emotional situation presented itself, but the sight of El's distraught, mascara-streaked, face brought out her comforting side. "Tell me what happened."

"Mike," she choked out, her voice barely above a whisper. "He broke with me," she explained choppily, her speech slipping back into its broken version as tears started to flow once more.

"He *dumped* you?" Max asked incredulously, her tone one of disbelief. "No way. That boy would cut off his own arm before he *dumped* you."

El's heart sunk at her friend's words, shaking her head sadly. Clearly, her friends thought, like she had for so long, that Mike would be the one person who wouldn't hurt her. She snorted to herself at her

naivete. *There's no one in this world that cannot hurt me, she thought. I guess he was just the one who could hurt me the most.*

"Wow," Max sank down to the floor, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with El. "If you two can't make it work, there's no hope for the rest of us. I mean, you guys have been together for so long, and been through so much when you were kids...damn, I didn't know love could suck so much."

El nodded sullenly, and although she appreciated her friend's comforting words, she couldn't stop fear and pain from coursing through her bloodstream. "Now that Mike and I are...broke, will-will you still be my friend?"

"Of course," Max said adamantly, looking at the curtain of curls hiding the teenager's upset expression from view. "I'm always going to be there for you El. No matter what."

"And will Dustin, Lucas, and Will still be my friends?" She asked quietly, and was met with silence. El braced herself for the answer, since she knew that Max was always honest, and she was counting on the redhead to be blunt with her.

Max sighed, hanging her head, "I don't know about the guys. I mean, they're really tight and I'm sure they will still *want* to be with friends, but I can't speak for them. I mean, imagine if Dustin and I started dating, and then broke up, would the guys really pick me over him?" Max cringed slightly at the harshness of her words, but El exhaled, almost as if she was relieved by the answer.

"I don't want to break up the party," she murmured, tucking some hair behind her ear. She had seen what could go wrong when the boys were separated and she never wanted to be the cause of that... again.

"Hey," Max stood up, sticking out her hand, "if Mike Wheeler let go of an awesome, freaking *telekinetic* girl like you, he had no idea what was right in front of him."

El blushed, allowing her friend to pull her to her feet before pulling the redhead into a tight hug. "Thank you. And I think that if you and

Dustin were a couple, you guys would never break."

Max beamed, reaching out and giving El one of her rare hugs, the kind that almost made her friend forget about the horrible break up. "Besides, if the guys are jerks and ignore you, you and me can be our own party of two."

Smiling meekly, El allowed herself to be led out of the bathroom, but her heart was throbbing with a pain that was not going to be dulled for many years.

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*From when we were the children playing in this fairground*

September 3, 1988

El Byers sprinted across the middle school parking lot, her curls streaming behind her, the golden strands catching the few scattered rays of sunlight filtering through the patchy clouds, and as the first few drops of rain fell. Her mom had warned her that she should cut her time at the library short today, since a severe storm was supposed to be coming to Hawkins that afternoon.

She counted herself lucky that Mrs. Morris had a stack of books that needed to be loaned out to the middle school's library, so El had been able to outrun the harshest part of the storm. The wind slammed the doors behind her, and El jumped, dropping a few books in her shock. She was unused to objects opening, closing, or just generally moving on their own accord when she was not using her powers. Shaking her head and fighting a blush, she was relieved that her friends weren't there to tease her about her jumpiness.

*Dustin and Lucas would have asked why I was so scared when I normally cause events like that, as they refused to admit they were scared, and would probably keep horsing around and try to scare me again,* El smiled to herself at the thought, creating the images of her friends in her mind. *Will would've jumped as well—he will always be haunted by the Upside-Down, even more than I wa-am—but he would be secretly proud of himself that he managed not to scream, and would take a few deep breaths to calm himself.* As she wandered the empty halls, making her way towards the library, she forgot to check her thoughts and her

mind plowed ahead with her imaginary scenario, full-force. *Mike would have snapped at them to stop teasing me, and would ask if I was actually okay, putting an arm around me—he never really cared how much grief his friends gave him whenever did something to show how much he...cared.*

El stopped in her tracks as two events happened at the same time, the minute the thought entered her head.

One, was that the little voice in her mind, a voice that sounded too much like her Papa, immediately interjected with the harsh reminder: *he wouldn't do that anymore. He broke up with you, remember?*

Two, she had absentmindedly been glancing at every doorway she passed, and stopped dead when she caught sight of a familiar science classroom. When she started school, it was in ninth grade, so she didn't have to set foot in the room where the Demogorgon tried to kill her and her friends.

She stared into the unchanged room, entranced by its stillness, and she couldn't help thinking that she was seeing things—some long-hidden side-effect of her time at the Lab—because there was no way that the room had not changed. Memories flashed through her mind, throwing her into a storm of emotions and images that rooted her to the ground.

*Pain all over. Rocks flying from a slingshot. A tortured scream. The terrifying roar of the Demogorgon. Pain in her heart. The iron smell of blood. "Goodbye Mike."*

Her lips formed the words, the last words she thought she would ever say to Mike Wheeler, but she couldn't bring herself to speak those painful, heartbreaking words aloud.

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*Wish I was there with you now*

September 3, 1988

Mike brushed the drops of rain from his dark hair, shrugging out of his soaked raincoat once he made it inside the middle school doors.



He groaned as lightning lit up the dim hallways, a loud *crack* of thunder right behind it. He had just managed to pull into the parking lot before the rain started coming down so heavily that he couldn't see out his car's windows. Since the storm didn't seem like it would be letting up for the foreseeable future, he wandered farther into the school.

The threat of bad weather seemed to have been enough of a reason for the administration to call for an early dismissal, so Mike hadn't come across anyone, until he turned down a familiar hallway, and spotted a small, curly-haired figure standing just outside a science classroom.

To most observers, she would seem odd and out of place, staring into space in front of a closed door to a perfectly normal science classroom. Others wouldn't even give her a second look, and would miss the tension held in her shoulders or the fact that her entire body was shaking with said tension. No one else would find it out of the ordinary that they could walk across the entire hallway to within an arm's length of her, and she didn't make a noise, as if she didn't even notice that there was another person observing her.

But Mike wasn't most people, and he saw all of those little things and his heart managed to tear itself into even more pieces than it was currently made up of.

"El," he whispered, trying his hardest not to startle her, but she jumped anyway, never so much as a gasp escaping her. Her eyes widened, but she still made no noise, and merely hugged the stack of books in her arms tighter to her chest, as she turned to face him. "Hey El," he said quietly, his hands had a slight spasm as he went to reach out to her, before remembering that he had forfeited that right over a year ago, "are you...?"

She shook her head, swiping a hand beneath her watering eyes, and she didn't need to explain to him why this particular room had her so shaken.

"I couldn't stand to be in this room for such a long time afterward," Mike started talking, turning to look through the small window on the door, unable to look at her distraught expression for much longer.

It was this dormant desire he had to make El feel normal, and merely *understood*. "I got into so much trouble because I skipped nearly every science class I had in that room, for the rest of the year after... everything happened. I point-blank refused to have a class there during eighth grade. I made my mom go to the school and switch me out, or else I would simply keep skipping." The shadow of a grin made its way onto his face, as he remembered his mother's face when he told her that he was going to skip science for an entire year of school.

"I'm sorry," El croaked, her voice sounding thin, almost as if it was about to break. "It's my fault you had to go through all of *that*."

Mike's head snapped in her direction, and he studied her downcast face, the first tears hovering in the corners of her eyes, a look of bewilderment adorning his own face. "What? No! None of that was your fault." A horrifying thought crossed his mind, and his voice rose to a shout. "Have you thought...this entire time, have you been thinking that what happened that week was somehow your *fault*?"

She was silent for so long, that Mike was about to launch into a tirade about the evils of Hawkins National Laboratory and about how she saved him, when he heard her quiet response that managed to anger him even further.

"I'm the monster. I've always been one. Why else would you dump me?" He could tell that the word was unfamiliar on her tongue, causing his shame to completely redirect his anger back onto himself.

"You don't really believe that I think that, do you?" He winced when her response to his question was merely a glance in his direction and an arch of her eyebrows. "God El! That's not even close to what I think, and even if it were, that's not why I would break up with you!"

He heard her take a deep breath, and she turned to look him in the eye, never once flinching as she asked him what he knew must have been weighing on her since the last February thirteenth that didn't immediately cause either of them pain.

"Why did you break with me?"

For one of the few times in his life, words failed him as he tried to choke out an answer. Mike knew that she was taking his lack of response as proof of her misunderstanding of social norms, but he couldn't bring himself to tell her what had been going through his mind on the worst afternoon of his life.

"I know I shouldn't be asking you this," El continued, a surprising move by the normally shy teen. "You made it clear that I wasn't fit to be your girlfriend, or even your friend. But I was hoping that it was far enough in the past, that you felt okay telling me why you didn't want me."

Mike sighed, hanging his head, because standing in front of this classroom, where she once whispered the words "goodbye Mike" in such pain but with pride in her eyes as she saved her friends; he felt such a weight to say exactly the right words or else he thought that when she said those words again, *he* would be the source of her pain instead of a Demogorgon. "I never stopped wanting you—as a girlfriend or as a friend. It ripped my heart to pieces to break up with you that day, but you have to understand that I had to break up with you, so you could experience life outside of dating a geek. Besides Troy had said something really..."

"Don't try and say that now, when you didn't care to tell me that day! And breaking up with me wasn't very helpful!" El exploded, causing a lightbulb to burst, scaring both teenagers nearly out of their minds. "I didn't care about what life was like if I was never dating you. I lo—" she choked on the end of the word, and Mike felt tears of shame burn his eyes when he realized the extent to which he hurt her. "I was so worried of losing you and Dustin and Lucas and Max as friends that I know I tried too hard to be normal, but I never wanted to be someone else's girlfriend!"

"I'm sorry," Mike apologized, but the words seemed hollow and pathetic to his ears. After the two of them had broken up, he became determined to cut El out of his life nearly completely. So he stopped inviting her over for D&D or always managed to find homework he had to do in the library when she sat down at their lunch table, and it put so much pressure on the rest of their friends—the guys especially—to navigate the turbulent waters. In the beginning, Dustin and Lucas tried to get them back together, but they eventually stopped

making an effort and let their friendship with El decline to that of casual school friends. Max had no trouble putting Mike in his place after the break up and stuck by El, her fiercely protective side emerging in a pretty terrifying way. Mike felt the worst for Will because he was torn between his friends and his sister, and he knew how much it hurt the quiet boy to say that he was going to the Wheelers but that El wasn't invited.

"I'm sorry too," El stated simply, turning away to walk down the hall. Other girls might have made the statement sound spiteful or bitter, but El simply sounded sad, as she was genuinely sorry about what happened between them.

Mike knew the two words that would seal his fate were on the tip of her tongue, so he shouted out, "I broke up with Cathy."

It had the desired effect, since El turned back around and looked at him with a surprised expression. He tried to dismiss the glimmer of hope in her eyes as a trick of the light, but he failed miserably.

"It was a few months ago," he continued, shoving his hands in his pockets to stop from fidgeting. "I kept being reminded of that New Year's party and how wrong it felt every time I was with her. I know you probably don't hate me, but you should. I hurt you, and friends don't do that to each other, they tell the truth...and I haven't told you the real reason why I broke up with you. You saw me after a fight, like an actual fistfight, with Troy, and he had said some pretty awful things, about you and me—and *that week*—that I just kind of saw red that day." He looked down sheepishly, to keep El from seeing the tears threatening to spill. "I didn't think I deserved you. But at the same time, I didn't want to lose you"

"Mike," she murmured, "don't think that." Mike refused to meet her eyes, continuing to stare at his shoes as the tears splashed on the tile floor.

*This is exactly why I don't deserve her, he thought sadly. Even after everything I've done to her and the pain I caused her, she's still being supportive and cares about how I think of her. She's always been too good and caring and amazing for such a wasteoid like me.* His self-deprecating train of thought was interrupted when he felt her soft

hand cup his cheek. He squeezed his eyes shut, as he felt vibrations echo through his cheek due to the shakiness of her hand.

"But I don't," Mike had never felt so small in his life. El's gaze always managed to see straight to the heart of him, and right now, he knew she was seeing every single one of his insecurities.

"Friends don't lie," she stated simply, and he finally opened his eyes. Inky-black met hazel, and he found the mystery and innocence that had first drew him to her one rainy November night.

"Promise?" He replied, and El rose on her tiptoes to plant a soft kiss on his cheek.

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*'Cause if the whole world was watching I'd still dance with you*

May 19, 1989

Mike stared at the door of the Byers's house, a terrified look on his face, and he fiddled with the plastic box in his hand as Lucas rolled his eyes at him and knocked on the door. Before he could sprint back down the driveway, the door was opened by possibly the last person Mike had wanted to see open the door.

"Wheeler, Henderson, Sinclair," Chief Hopper greeted the boys, nodding briefly to Dustin and Lucas, but merely narrowed his eyes when they fell on Mike. He glanced around the porch noticing that their party was one short. "Where is my own son?"

The trio exchanged nervous glances, none of them excited about getting grilled by the police chief at the start of their prom night. None of the three wanted to answer, but Mike spoke up when Hopper arched an eyebrow—it was probably a good idea to get on the chief's good side. "He's, um, kind of trying not to throw up."

"Did you guys already start hitting the punch?" Hopper joked dryly, stepping outside and finding Will doubled over in the bushes that bordered the side of their house. He sighed, waving a hand at the three teenagers still standing on the stoop, wearing various expressions of terror and confusion. "Go say hello to the girls, they're

right inside. I'll talk to Will."

Dustin nodded a little too enthusiastically, Lucas said, "Yes sir," and Mike just sighed, clearly relieved that Hopper wasn't interested in arresting him the second he stepped through the door.

Mrs. Byers-Hopper was directing the four girls into different arrangements in front of one wall based on height, then by dress color, then different pairs and trios, all while Jonathan snapped away on his camera. They were both so focused on getting every single picture necessary that they didn't notice that the boys had arrived, until El caught sight of Mike over her mother's shoulder.

"Mike!" She exclaimed, pushing past her older brother to give the dark-haired boy a long hug. "You came," she whispered into his ear, sounding genuinely surprised and relieved.

He felt a pang in his chest, realizing that she had been worried that he could somehow forget he was taking her or if he suddenly wouldn't want to. "I promised," he whispered back gently, grinning when he felt her smile against his neck.

"El, honey," Mrs. Byers-Hopper said frantically, "you don't want to mess up your dress. Jonathan, how much film do you have left, I just realized we still need to take pictures of the boys, and of all the couples."

"Mom," Jonathan placated his mother, finally lowering the camera from his face, revealing bags underneath his eyes, probably due to the jet lag from the late flight he had arrived on earlier that morning. Mike was surprised that he had taken the time out of his job as a freelance photographer to come back to Hawkins, but then again, he knew that the brotherly bond between Will and Jonathan had been strengthened ever since the latter had first left for NYU.

"I know, I know," the frazzled mother raised her hands in surrender. "I'm being crazy."

"It's fine Mrs. Byers-Hopper," Jennifer Hayes said in a calm tone, but her eyes darted from face to face, looking for her date.

"Oh my God," Max suddenly exclaimed, punching Dustin on the arm, "stop staring at me like that, you Wookie! It's not like I never wear dresses!"

Dustin opened and closed his mouth repeatedly, doing a great impression of a dumbstruck fish, as he continued to stare at Max. She was wearing a simple, knee-length, green dress, with slightly puffy sleeves and low heels. Her hair was also curled, something none of the boys ever thought they would see her do; it was an action, right up there with wearing make-up, which she was also sporting, that they thought she never would've been caught dead doing.

When Dustin finally recovered his senses, the two of them started their version of flirting once more, a version that included quite a lot of arguing. Lucas quickly moved to compliment his own date, a girl in the grade below them named Mary, whose short, fluffy, purple dress complemented her short dark hair and light brown skin.

Mike realized that he hadn't said anything about how El looked, and quickly turned to look at her all dressed up. He was immediately struck by how mature and stunning she looked, and thought to himself, *she will never stop surprising me at how beautiful she can be.*

"Pretty?" El asked in a worried tone. She was wearing a pink dress, it went down to her mid-calf, yet looked like the fabric was floating due to all the layers in the skirt. A silver snowflake pendant hung above a sweetheart neckline that led into off-the-shoulder sleeves, and a matching silver headband rested in her brown hair, which was twisted up into a fancy knot at the top of her head. She seemed to be glowing.

"Beautiful," he replied, reaching over to take one of her hands and giving it a gentle squeeze.

She smiled shyly, and gave him a brief kiss on the cheek, but then blushed when she realized that he now had a pink lip-shaped smudge on his freckly cheek. "Sorry," El murmured, trying to wipe it away with her wrist, to no success.

"It's fine," Mike said nonchalantly, taking a tissue from one of his tux's pockets and scrubbed at his face, but never broke eye contact with El.

She blushed under his gaze, but didn't look away, moving her hand from his cheek to rest on his shoulder, and his eyes followed her movement, catching a glimpse of harsh black marks on her forearm.

"You didn't cover your tattoo," he remarked, but immediately regretted his words when her other hand unconsciously went to cover the marks. "No don't! It looks really cool. And it makes you...you," he said feebly, mentally slapping himself for ruining the night, before it had even started, with such a stupid remark.

El smiled, slowly withdrawing the hand that covered the numbers, before holding it out to him. He suddenly remembered the corsage box he had been holding, and slipped the small cluster of white roses, baby's breath, and ribbon over her wrist. Mike broke into a wide smile as he saw that the flowers didn't cover the tattoo and as she pinned a matching boutonniere on his jacket.

The opening door cut through their bubble, and the couple giggled to cover up their embarrassment at the fact that they had completely forgotten about the half dozen other people in the room. Will entered, looking only slightly gray-faced, but his odd complexion didn't last long because once he caught sight of Jennifer, his face completely lit up. Jennifer blushed down to the roots of her blonde hair, running her hands down the front of her floor-length, navy blue dress.

"Well," Jonathan clapped his hands loudly, breaking through all the awkward teenage tension, "now that everyone's here, I think it's time for another round of pictures."

After a half-hour to an hour of picture-taking, once more cycling through every conceivable combination of the eight teens, Will and El convinced Hopper to let them ride in his truck's bed to prom. The girls squealed as the vehicle jerked to a start, and all the kids quickly took seats on the blankets that covered the bed.

"Dude," Dustin fist-bumped Will, "this is totally going to be the coolest ride at prom!"

The eight teens dissolved into laughter, and before long they had arrived at the high school. A long line of cars wound through the



parking lot, but the boys simply jumped down from the truck's bed, each extending a hand to his date to help her down.

"I'll be back when the dance is over," Hopper told the party. "I hope you kids have fun, it's not every day that you get to go to prom."

A chorus of thanks, agreement, and good-byes nearly assaulted the chief's ears, but a good-natured smile spread over his normally stoic face.

"Oh, and Wheeler, Hayes," his tone turned curt, and the smile dropped from his face, "don't try any funny business with my kids. I can and will throw you in jail if I hear that something inappropriate happened at this dance."

Mike and Jennifer nodded, identical expressions of fear graced their faces, letting out twin exhales once the chief's truck was out of their eyesight.

"Let's get going!" Dustin shouted, punching his fist into the air.

As they made their way into the school and the gymnasium, Mike couldn't help but feel nervous about how El would react to the dance. After all, the only other time the two of them had been to a dance was the Nightmare-Snow Ball he had dreamed up in seventh grade.

"Mike," she said softly, and as he looked around he noticed that they were the only two left in the corridor.

"Where did everyone go?" He asked, his eyes darting to the open gym doors, as if he could see his friends in the dimly lit room.

"They went inside already," El explained, continuing to stare at him, and only the slight furrow of her brows let him know that she was worried.

"Sorry, I spaced out for a second," he apologized, taking her hand. "Let's go inside."

The two quickly caught up with the rest of their friends, and the eight claimed their own spot on the dance floor, and simply lost themselves in the music, reveling in the joyously fun atmosphere of

the night. Lucas and Dustin kept trying to outdo one another with the craziest dance moves, while Mary and Jennifer simply laughed at their antics. Max grabbed El and spun her around, genuine smiles lighting up the faces of two girls who didn't smile as often as they should. Mike hung back with Will, neither of their personalities lending themselves to extravagant dancing, so the two simply nodded their heads in time with the music. But it didn't take long before their dates dragged them out of their shells and Mike knew he must be grinning like an idiot as El danced with him, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

It was less than an hour later when a slow song came on, and nearly every teenager in the gym stopped dancing. For about half a minute, the eight teens stood in a circle, the girls staring at their feet, and the boys exchanging glances with each other.

"Mike," El whispered, making the first move and sticking her hand out to her boyfriend. Mike blushed, his cheeks turning a shade of red more often associated with fire engines than skin tone, but he grabbed her hand, leading her out to the middle of the dance floor.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Will make some sort of awkward half-bow to Jennifer, as she laughed good-naturedly and took his proffered hand. Lucas was the next to ask his date to dance, and Mary nodded her head enthusiastically. Max and Dustin stood apart for probably another five seconds, sneaking glances at one another, but Max eventually rolled her eyes and pulled Dustin closer.

Mike stared back at the prettiest girl in the room—in his eyes at least—and settled his hands on her waist, pulling her in close, close enough to smell the hint of strawberry perfume she had used. El's hands went around his neck, and they simply swayed together, not even in time with the music. Staring into her expressive eyes, Mike saw an internal struggle; she was clearly debating something in her mind, but he had no idea why or what she was struggling with.

"Is there something—" he started, but El had started to speak nearly at the same time.

"I love you," she had nearly whispered the words, but he heard them all the same.

All of the confusion, and nervousness, swirling in his mind suddenly disappeared, replaced only with affection and inexplicable joy. He couldn't explain it, but his mind felt like it had been shorted out, and the only thing he could think of to say was, "I love you too."

El's face took on one of relief, before a slight grin, one usually reserved for Mike, lit up her face, and Mike had to revise his earlier statement. He didn't just love her in this moment, or simply over the past few months, he had loved her for years now, and he would never stop loving her.

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*Drive highways and byways to be there with you*

May 20, 1989

As the dance was ending, just past one in the morning, a small group of four couples stood outside the doors of Hawkins High School, waiting for the chief's car to pull up. Will had called his father earlier, asking for Hopper to round up the boy's bikes from their respective houses, and bring them to the school. Mike wasn't sure if the chief would be okay with the eight of them riding around Hawkins so late at night—or early morning, as Dustin would point out.

"Hop!" Will cried, waving a hand to signal his father, the other clutching Jennifer's, who just so happened to get cold and was wearing Will's suit jacket over her prom dress.

"I don't know why you kids need these things anymore," Hopper grumbled, sticking his head out the window, "all you boys can drive."

"It just seemed like it was the way to get home today," Mike explained, straining as he pulled his bike out of the truck's bed. But, when he extracted it from the pile of bikes, the back wheel rushed towards the ground, aiming directly towards his foot, yet it miraculously jerked to the left at the last second, bouncing harmlessly on the ground. "It's like the end of an era," he grinned, winking at his girlfriend who was sneakily wiping her nose.

"Whatever you say," Hop said gruffly. "Just have fun and don't get killed or captured by some otherworldly monster." Mary and Jennifer

laughed at the chief's joke, while Dustin, Max, Lucas, and Mike forced their laughter, but Will and El simply rolled their eyes at their dad.

However, Mike reached over and gave El's hand a comforting squeeze, before climbing onto his bike. He felt a flutter in his stomach as El hopped on the bike behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist, and glanced over his shoulder, flashing her a bright smile.

"Let's go, we're burning daylight here," Dustin called, laughing at his own joke as Max chuckled from her spot behind him on his bike.

The other two couples quickly mounted the boys' bikes, and Mike was shocked at how swiftly the popular girl twisted up her long dress so she could sit behind Will more easily.

"Will looks like he's going to pass out," Lucas whispered loudly to Mike and El.

"I'm surprised he hasn't fainted yet to be honest," Mike responded, turning to grin at El, whose face was lit up at the joy of seeing her brother happy.

"Let's go!" Dustin shouted again, drawing out the last word so it sounded kind of whiny.

The four bikes were soon speeding down the streets of Hawkins, the wind biting at their arms and turning cheeks slightly pink. As they were passing Mary's neighborhood, Lucas announced that his date had been asleep for nearly twenty minutes, and he dropped her off at her house. The other six slowly continued down the road, but all the boys teased him mercilessly when the stoic Lucas came back with a lopsided grin and lipstick smudges around his mouth.

The party spent a few more minutes, all seven thoroughly enjoying their group's version of "after-prom," but Mike couldn't shake an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach, as they biked aimlessly through the deserted roads of their town. Will—who frankly still looked moments away from unconsciousness—spoke up, after a few more blocks of silent riding.

"Why don't we go to the lake?" He called to his friends, already setting his bike on the route down to their shore.

"Hold on," Mike warned El, as their bikes veered off the smooth asphalt and into the more bumpy terrain of the forest. He dropped behind the rest of his friends, observing how happy Jennifer and Will looked once they were finally able to admit their mutual feelings for one another, and for Will to overcome the stigma of being the "zombie kid" and ask out the most popular girl in school. And speaking of admitting mutual feelings, once Max and Dustin were officially dating, their friendship didn't change much, but Mike saw how much more comfortable his friend was around the redhead. As he looked at the happy couples, there was that weight in his heart as he reminded himself once again, of his boneheaded idea to break-up with El, and his shame at how long it took him to realize his mistake. Realizing that there were some things he still needed to tell El, things that didn't quite fit with the friendly atmosphere surrounding the biking teens, he started mapping an alternate course.

"I'll catch up with you guys later," Mike shouted to his friends, angling his bike away from the direction of the rest of the guys. Shaking his head at the immature "oohs" and kissing noises that his friends threw his way, he pedaled as fast as he could away from the others.

"Where are we going?" El asked simply, her curls escaping her hairdo to brush his neck.

"Uh," Mike stalled, the inevitable fear and anger that would flare up once the old quarry came into view.

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*Over and over the only truth,*

*Everything comes back to you*

May 20, 1989

Mike felt El's breath becoming shorter as he slowed the bike down, stopping several meters away from the edge of the quarry. Making sure that El knew to get off, he gently set the bike down on its side

on the side of the gravel road. He thoroughly hated the place, and he hadn't been back since...that night, but he knew that facing his fears about El and her place in his life, meant facing the fears in his past.

"Why did you bring me here?" She demanded, her face twisted in confusion, and barely contained rage. El had never told him exactly why she hated the quarry—and he didn't want to ask, and bring up the awful memories—but he could guess it had to do with that afternoon when he jumped to save Dustin.

"I haven't been here since seventh grade probably," he started, shoving his hands into his jacket's pockets, to hide their shakiness from her. His eyes scanned the ground, as if he was looking for something he had dropped. *My courage?* He thought sarcastically, his mouth going dry as El's feet came into view.

"I haven't been back since that day either," El agreed, her voice sounding incredibly small and far away.

Mike felt his heart pounding in his chest, and his blood roared in his ears, blocking out nearly all sound. This seemed marginally more scary than saying "I love you" to El, because he had been sure of his feelings for her, and he had been for a long time. But this? Telling the girl he loved that he contemplated stepping off that ledge one more time, in the hopes that she would reveal herself, he didn't know what she would think of him. "Not that day," Mike said hoarsely, feeling her eyes boring into his head, as if she could see past the dark hair covering his eyes, and stare into his very mind—without using even a lick of her powers.

"What do you mean?" El's feet shuffled back and forth, and he slowly brought his head up to look into her large, round eyes.

"I came back one night after you were...gone," Mike basically choked on the last word, but powered through before she could interject. "I-I was trying to contact you. It was a few months after you... disappeared. And so I was biking in the middle of the night, trying to get back into the lab," he paused, noticing that there were tears turning El's hazel eyes into mirrors, "I just wanted you to come back."

"And I did," El said soothingly, grabbing his wrist and squeezing

tightly. "You, and everyone else, you found me and brought me back."

"I know, I know," he nodded vigorously. He clenched his hands into fists inside his pockets, trying not to look away from his girlfriend's troubled expression. *How do I make this next part not sound like her fault?* He thought, taking a deep breath, "I just thought you would be back in time for the Snow Ball. And I *know* that you physically couldn't get back that early, but I didn't know that then. I remember thinking about how I promised to take you, and I hated having to break that promise. So, I came out here that night—the night after the Snow Ball—and thought, if I jumped off, maybe you would save me, and I could see you again."

El clapped her free hand over her mouth, turning away, but letting herself be tethered by her grip on his arm. Once more, Mike's heart sunk at seeing how much pain he caused her, and the nagging voice in the back of his mind told him to cut her loose, breaking her heart for one more time tonight, to spare her a lifetime of more heartbreaks a future with him must hold. Who knows how many more times he could hurt her? He smirked at what he thought her face would look like if he broke up with her again; he thought she might actually use her powers to keep him by her side until he realized how stupid that would be—he would follow her anywhere, even the Upside-Down, for the rest of his life. But, when he pulled himself out of his own head, he heard the soft sobs emanating from the small girl.

"I'm so sorry," he apologized, but the words seemed so inadequate, compared to the pressure and *guilt* he must have just put on her.

"Friends don't lie," she breathed, so quietly, that Mike thought he had imagined them, until she turned around. Her hand was shaking as her palm slowly reconnected with his cheek. The tears streamed down her face, cutting streaks into her make-up, and Mike was furious with himself for making her cry on what was supposed to be a happy night. One of the best nights of their lives so far. "Friends don't lie," she repeated, her eyes brimming once more with unshed tears, "and I did. I never told you how I felt after I came back."

"That's not your fault," Mike assured her, trying to keep his voice from raising to a shout. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want

to. I was the one who didn't figure out how to get you back earlier."

It was as if she was in her own world, and her eyes seemed to look past him—she was remembering her year-long stay in the Upside-Down. "I was afraid. After I came back, I was still afraid. I never thought I would leave Upside-Down, and that it would stay," she pointed to her own chest. She fell silent for a minute, and Mike felt, once more, that words were failing him. "I thought I was the monster and there was no way you could like a monster."

"So you didn't say anything," Mike continued, almost at the exact same second she stopped talking. "You've never been a monster to me, El," he said softly, finally unclenching his hands, bringing them out of his pockets, taking her hand with one and brushing a stray curl behind her ear with the other. "I love you."

She looked up at him, her cheeks finally dry of tears, but her eyes held apprehension and fear. Without needing any words, he knew the question that was sure to be dancing in her head, and seemed to be on the verge of asking him, *promise?*

He chuckled softly, in awe at how someone so pure, and innocent, and good could come from the midnight-dark background she had. Her powers made her a force to be reckoned with, but it had been her heart, and personality that he had fallen in love with, and it constantly amazed him that she couldn't see just how in love he was. "I promise."

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**A/N: Okay, so while the first chapter was a mix between fluff and angst, this one definitely skewed more towards the angsty side, but don't worry, there's fluff on the way! As always, please review, I love seeing and reading your all's comments about my writing/the story in general!**



### 3. December 14, 1996

A/N: So here's another late-night Stranger Thursday post for you all! So I decided to split it into three chapters with an epilogue, which will be uploaded next week. I just felt that the end of this chapter felt like a good way to end it, and adding what I'm going to put in the epilogue would be too much of a shift in tone.

Thank you so much to all of my readers, and those who have followed and favorited this story I cannot say how much I appreciate it! Also, special shout-out to ThisisMel and my Guest reviewer, I deeply appreciate your thoughts.

Enjoy!

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*You still make me nervous when you walk in the room*

December 14, 1996

Over the past few months, the Byers-Hopper house had become a hub of activity, different people flowing in and out, flowers everywhere, caterers running amuck...the list simply went on and on. El felt overwhelmed by all of the decisions she needed to make, and how much needed to be done in the short span of one day.

"El!" Her mother rushed to her side, her voice frantic and she absentmindedly ran her hands through El's brown curls. "Honey, shouldn't you be getting ready? There's not much time before we have to go."

"We have six hours," El replied, a confused look coming over her face.

Her mom smiled wistfully, as if she was reminded of some better time, before wrapping her adoptive daughter up in a tight, but brief, hug. "Go, all of the girls will be here soon."

El nodded, thankful to be escaping the hectic nature of the rest of the house. Her parents were calling nearly everyone involved in the event, double- and triple-checking everything, Will had left already,

but Jonathan, calm, quiet Jonathan, had gotten into two different fights with the hired photographer in the past three hours, threatening to photograph the event himself at one point. El shook her head, smiling softly to herself at her family's high-strung antics.

Settling herself down in front of her small mirror, she pulled her make-up bag towards her, but had no idea where to even begin. She had learned to do her own make-up over the years, but she had a feeling that her standard look of eyeliner and lip gloss would not be very appropriate for her...

"Hey El!" Nancy Wheeler greeted, dashing over to give the young woman a hug, a beaming smile adorning the eldest Wheeler's face.

"Nancy! How are you?" El exclaimed in relief, practically throwing her make-up tools down in her rush to return the embrace.

"I'm great," the older woman replied, smiling from ear-to-ear. "I just started working for a new CSI agency, and Steve is still at the law firm so we're doing pretty well. How's...all of this going?" She gestured to the spread of make-up products before her, "I don't remember it being this complicated."

"Please help," El whined playfully, shoving a small brush into her hand.

"Of course," Nancy turned the other young woman around in her seat, and immediately started lining up the different make-up products and tools, before selecting a foundation and brush. In the years after her return, Nancy had taken it upon herself to be the older sister that El had never had. She taught her all the girly tools "required" of her—much to the exasperation of her little brother—how to dress, and how to do her make-up without looking clownish like some girls, and most importantly, how to make her natural curls shine and avoid tangles.

El smiled and closed her eyes, letting the older girl work her make-up magic. Brushes kissed her cheeks, and softly swiped across the lids of her eyes. The eyeliner pencil tugged at her lids, and a similar tool traced her lips, before filling them in with what El was sure to be lipstick. She even heard the spray of perfume over her skin, and

Nancy moved to fiddle with her hair. But she couldn't help feeling a swirl of butterflies come to life in the pit of her stomach. *What if all this extra make-up makes me look too different?* She thought to herself, taking deep breaths to calm her overactive nerves, but before she could worry anymore, Nancy told her to open her eyes.

She stared at the face staring back at her in her small mirror, and realized that all of her worries had disappeared. She still looked like 'El' but the make-up made her skin glow, and her hazel eyes pop with liner and eyeshadow. *Pretty*, she thought with a sigh, her pale pink lips curving upwards into a small smile.

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*Them butterflies—they come alive when I'm next to you*

December 20, 1990

El had been staring the textbook in front of her for around two hours, not comprehending a single word. She had been counting down the days until her friends came back to Hawkins for winter break, and they were all supposed to be arriving within a few days of each other, but Mike had assured her that he would be coming back a day before the rest of the guys.

"Any minute now," El muttered to herself, glancing around the empty house and thinking about running a brush through her untamable curls one more time, but the doorbell rang nearly the second she got out of the chair to go find a hairbrush. A grin spread over her cheeks, and she dashed over to the door, flinging it open to reveal the face of her smiling boyfriend. "Mike," she said quietly as he wrapped his arms around her small form and practically lifted her off her feet.

"Hi El," he stated simply, setting her back on the floor, but she quickly rose back on her tiptoes to plant a soft kiss on his cold lips. "I missed you," he whispered, so quietly she would've thought she had imagined it, if she hadn't felt his lips forming the words against her own.

Pulling back, she looked up and studied his freckled face, a bright smile nearly splitting his cheeks, but once El noticed the redness of his nose, and the dusting of snow in his dark hair, she immediately

pulled him inside the house.

"Thanks," he said, shedding his heavy winter coat and rubbing his hands over his arms vigorously. "It's freezing out. But never mind that, what's new with you? Any cool stories from the library?"

El shook her head, looking towards her feet, embarrassed by her simple life. She wished she could go off to college with her friends, and experience life outside of Hawkins, and although her parents had never outright forbid her from leaving town, they did warn her about how the world might react to her powers, and that her lack of documentation could be a serious problem outside of their town. So she stayed. Working at the library and volunteering at the middle school as a substitute librarian when they needed her, and waiting for her and Mike's weekly call, or the next lunch with Max or Nancy or Jennifer every few weeks.

"El," Mike interrupted, squeezing her hand reassuringly, "are you okay?"

"Yes," she said, leaning her head on his shoulder contentedly. "Of course."

He nodded brightly, scanning the room, and when he glanced out the window, a spark of mischief lit up his dark eyes. El grinned, adoring the look that came over his face whenever he was planning a campaign or some other adventure because she could practically see the wheels in his brain at work.

"Come on," he urged, grabbing her hand and nearly dragging her out the door, the joy in his voice and on his face, made him seem like he was twelve or fourteen-years-old again with not a care in the world.

She was surprised when he dashed to the backyard, but she was so interested in following him that she completely forgot to grab a coat for either of them. Snowflakes floated in front of her face, catching on her eyelashes and in her curly hair. It had taken her years to see the falling flakes as *snow* and not the ashy dust that had filled the air of the Upside-Down, but she always managed to stop her train of thought before the nightmarish visions filled her mind. Besides, these fluffy flakes of snow didn't fall with the harshness of the ash, but

danced in front of her eyes.

Mike suddenly stopped in the middle of the snow-covered backyard, turning to stare at her with a strange look on his face. El felt slightly self-conscious under his gaze, especially in her hand-me-down jeans and one of his old striped shirts. But, all such thoughts flew out of her head when she felt Mike take one of her hands and place it on his shoulder, and took the other one in his, adjusting them until they were in a similar position as they were during their slow dance at prom. *Although*, El noticed, *I do have to crane my neck to look at him now without those ridiculous heels on.*

"What...?" She could only start the question before her boyfriend started to spin her around the backyard, a childish grin lighting up his face. El shook her head at his antics, but soon threw back her head and laughed instead. His smile seemed to grow even brighter, and he lifted one hand for her to spin underneath, before pulling her back close, a ridiculously faux-serious look on his face.

They danced around the backyard until their feet and hands felt numb—El hadn't even been wearing socks when he dragged her outside—and Mike's cheeks soon became so red with the cold that his freckles nearly disappeared. Sighing at having to abandon their dance for the warmth of the house, El and Mike trudged back inside, his arm slung around her shoulders and hers wrapped around his waist.

"What was that?" El asked, as they collapsed onto the Byers's old couch, the two were exhausted but grinning unabashedly.

"Oh," Mike looked down sheepishly, the redness already in his cheeks hiding his blush, "I thought I could finally take you to the Snow Ball. I mean, it's not the same as what I *would* have taken you to in middle school, but...I thought it could be, I don't know."

El felt a swell of love and affection for him, overcome with emotions as she thought about how long he must have been agonizing over that one broken promise and for a way to finally keep it, for years. She leaned over and kissed him surely, but she poured all of her love and gratitude for their Snow Ball into the kiss.

"It was perfect," she assured him, lacing their fingers together and

leaning her head on his shoulder, unbelievably happy that she finally went to the Snow Ball.

When the Hoppers finally returned from the airport with Will, who had just gotten back from art school in California, they found the couple wrapped up in each other's arms on the couch, their hair and clothes slightly damp from melted snow. Will rolled his eyes at the overt affection of his friends, but he would gladly take this sickly romantic display over the silence and heartbreak that had nearly torn an irreparable rift between them a few years ago. Mrs. Byers-Hopper smiled, a faraway look in her eyes as she remembered her own teenage boyfriend, a man that now slung his arm around her as he tried not to appear too happy about the way El had found someone who truly loved her. And Jonathan managed to capture the images of the happy couples.

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*Over and over the only truth*

*Everything comes back to you*

January 4, 1991

Although El got to spend nearly two full weeks with her friends, it seemed like the time had passed in a blur. It had felt like they were back in high school again, if only it was for a couple weeks, but somehow, El felt like it was more special than a regular winter break.

All of her friends were now spread across the map, and although she knew in her mind that their friendships had been tested by more than just geographical distance, her heart hadn't been raised to quite accepted that yet, as remnants of her time in Hawkins Lab had taught her that the ones you loved didn't always love you back. So, as she gave Max and Jennifer one more good-bye hug, tears filling all three girls' eyes, she still feared that they would forget her.

"You shouldn't worry," Hopper assured warmly, putting an arm around her shoulders and giving her an affectionate squeeze. "All of your friends, they're good kids. At this point, you've been friends for so long I think you're stuck with each other."

El smiled, giving her adoptive father a small hug in return, and her grin spread to her eyes when she saw Mike's car pull up to the end of the driveway.

"Although I would be fine if you weren't *as good of friends* with him," the chief grumbled under her breath and El just rolled her eyes. She knew he wasn't being serious, because she had overheard him talking with her mom about how happy he was that El was with "that Wheeler boy," since he was "a decent kid."

"Are you going to pretend to be this overprotective forever?" She teased, beginning to walk towards her boyfriend.

"Until your wedding day," Hopper stated, a smirk breaking his normally harsh façade as he turned around to go back inside the house.

El laughed, practically skipping the rest of the distance down the driveway, and threw herself into Mike's arms. She felt his arms tighten around her right before he let her go to study her face intensely. For a minute, the two stood at the end of the Byers's driveway, their arms around one another as they tried to memorize each other's faces—Mike was mapping the curve of her lips and the way her hair curled and bounced around her face, while El was counting each freckle that dusted his cheeks and tried to remember the way his dark hair fell into his eyes when he needed to concentrate.

The two didn't really need words to express their care and love for one another, she had crossed worlds to find him again, while he had never stopped looking for a sign of her, and what expressions of love could be greater than those?

El suddenly didn't need to be reassured that he wouldn't forget her.

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*And I know that it's wrong*

February 14, 1991

Mike smiled at the flickering blue screen of his cell phone, as it

finally flashed "call ended." He looked around the small coffee shop he had been in when El called, and felt his cheeks flare red when he realized that about a dozen people could have overheard his Valentine's Day call with his girlfriend. He regularly cursed his pale complexion that made every slight change in tone immediately evident to those surrounding him.

"You two are still together, Wheeler?" A malicious and familiar voice snorted, and Mike's head whipped around to land on the speaker: Troy's lackey, James. "It's pretty disgusting how lovey-dovey you two are."

"What's it to you, James?" Mike retorted lazily, not letting the bully's taunts knock him out of his elated mood. "Troy's not here, you can drop the playground tormentor act."

The larger boy shook his head, plopping down into the seat across from Mike, his face transforming into a more open and friendly one. Ever since Troy had moved away for college, his former friend had become a much more amiable person, even apologizing to Will, Dustin, Lucas, and Mike for bullying them so much during middle and high school. And since he and Mike were in many of the same classes, the two had become somewhat close friends.

"I can still think the two of you are grossly in love with one another," he replied with a laugh, before his face turned a bit more thoughtful. "But on a more serious note, how have you guys managed to stay together for so long?"

Mike smirked, he didn't think, *she saved me from a monster straight out of D&D and then disappeared to another realm for a whole year, before returning to save us again*, would be the response James was looking for. "Umm, we made long-distance work once before, so anything after that is gonna' be a walk in the park. Besides, we did break up for a year or so in high school, and I know I'm not going to do that again, so I just work hard to make us work."

"You got it bad," James teased, but his smile gave away the fact that he wasn't being mean-spirited. "But you guys can't be together forever? Aren't you going to have to break up with her at some point?"



"Why can't we?" Mike said defensively, his voice rising slightly. His dad had felt the same way when he first went off to college, wanting him to focus on finding a career, and not being "hung up" on some high school girlfriend. When he had brought it up with his son, angry words had been exchanged, and the Wheeler house was cold and on the brink of another screaming match for weeks.

"I mean," he held up his hands, "it's not like you're going to marry her. We're way too young for that."

The dark-haired boy groaned, laying his head down on his crossed arms, but his head shot up as a thought crossed his mind. *Maybe not now, but there's no one else I would want to...*

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*That I can't move on*

December 14, 1996

The Wheeler house had turned into a controlled tornado of chaos, with Mrs. Wheeler shepherding family and friends alike throughout the different rooms, to take care of various tasks that needed to be done for later in the day. She was just shoos Nancy and Holly out the door as the four boys emerged from the basement.

"Boys, where have you been?" She stalked over to the four friends, and the young men wore identical expressions of fear, Mike even looking around for an escape route. "You need to be ready in..." she paused to check her watch, and Will jumped in.

"Three hours," he supplied meekly.

"Yes," Mrs. Wheeler agreed forcefully, grabbing her adult son by the collar of his rumpled polo and marching him up the stairs.

"Mom, Mom!" Mike twisted out of his mother's grip, annoyance painting his reddening face. His face softened when his mom burst into tears. "Mom, it's okay," he offered, patting her back awkwardly.

"My baby boy grew up so fast," she said, wrapping her son in a tight hug, before straightening up, wiping her tears away, and herded the boys upstairs. "But he's still going to be late, if you three don't keep

him on schedule! Everything you boys are going to need is in Mike's old room."

Choruses of "thank you, Mrs. Wheeler," echoed up the stairs, before turning into sighs as the door to Mike's room closed.

"Hey, Mike," Dustin piped up, "if you're still working at that IT company and you have your own apartment...why are we getting ready *here*?"

When the young man in question didn't respond, the old friends stood around awkwardly for a few minutes, with Lucas, Dustin, and Will all staring at Mike expectantly, who seemed to be boring holes through his tuxedo with his eyes and completely unaware of everyone else.

"Tradition I would guess. Geez, snap out of it, man!" Lucas slapped his friend on the back, startling the young man out of his reverie. "Your mom is going to strangle us if we're not ready soon."

Mike nodded and grabbed the dark suit from its hangar, as his friends quickly found their own suits and started getting ready, the four young men drifting to separate corners of the room, Will even ducking behind the dresser at one point to change into his tuxedo's slacks.

"Come on," Dustin exclaimed, "you just joined the military and you're still worried about what Mike's mom will do to you?"

"You're not?" Lucas retorted, raising an eyebrow defiantly. "I seem to remember you refusing to meet Mrs. Wheeler's eyes when she caught you sneaking a whole duffle bag full of snacks to the basement when we were thirteen."

"At midnight too," Will piped in, a mischievous smirk turning his normally haggard face into one that actually reflected his youth. "How is basic training going anyway?"

"Training's been going well," Lucas elaborated, unconsciously running a hand through his recently buzzed hair. "Really tough, and my mom still worries about deployment but that's not going to be for a while."

The room fell silent for a little bit at the reminder that one of their

number might be shipping out to some warzone, never to return. Mike felt a pang of guilt deep in the pit of his stomach, thinking that he shouldn't be worried about his own silly problems when life and death hung in the balance. He fiddled with the buttons on his dress shirt, glancing around at the party back together for the first time in months, and likely the only time they would be together for at least another six months, maybe even years.

"How's being a starving artist working out for you Will," Dustin asked, breaking some of the nervous tension in the small room.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Will snorted, deftly tying his bowtie around his neck and smoothing down his short hair. The Byers boy had matured quickly after his ordeal in the Upside-Down and had even shot up in height in high school, becoming only a few inches shorter than Mike. "I actually just started a series of illustrations for a line of children's books. It's a pretty decent job, and I'm making enough to stay in New York. And, since Jonathan's living in the City too, we get together every weekend for lunch to catch up. My brother's doing well too, making a name for himself as a photographer. I think he's happy—he got himself a girlfriend a couple months ago, and actually started having a social life."

"How's your love life going, Byers?" Mike asked, noting how Will's smile didn't even wrinkle his eyes.

"Same as always," Will replied sadly, staring down at his socked feet. "Girls aren't really lining up to date the kid who came back from the dead."

"Yeah, not if you lead with that, you idiot," Dustin shot back, rolling his eyes and throwing his hands up in exasperation.

"Or if you're still hung up on Jennifer Hayes," Mike muttered under his breath, but loud enough that his friend heard.

"Drop it," Will snapped, turning towards the door and away from the other three guys.

Before anyone could respond, or for Mike to apologize, Dustin's phone rang and with one glance at the screen, he disappeared into

the hallway, a mix of emotions on his face. The boys took the time to finish up getting into their suits, and Mike tried running a brush through his unruly dark hair, to no avail.

When the door opened once more, Dustin was running a hand through his curly hair, it had been cut short recently, but still fell over his eyes. He had filled out during college, shedding all of his baby fat, becoming fairly athletic after joining the wrestling team, and was second in muscle mass only to Lucas, looking like he was in a mix of adolescence and adulthood.

"You okay?" Mike asked, sitting on his bed to tie his shoes, before shrugging on his tux's jacket.

"Yeah, yeah," he waved a hand nonchalantly, his face remarkably pale. "It was just Max, nothing really important."

The other three shot him identical looks of disbelief and skepticism, but before Dustin could protest, the door banged open and Mike's mother barged into the center of the room.

"Mom!" Mike exclaimed, jumping up from the bed. "What do you want?"

"What have you four been doing for this whole time?" She ignored her son, looking at each of the boys in turn, scrutinizing their appearance, and when she deemed them worthy enough to be photographed, started herding them out into the hallway and down the stairs. "You all look so grown up," she wiped tears that were starting to form in the corners of her eyes.

"Mom!" Mike groaned in embarrassment, "I thought we were in a rush."

"Of course, of course. There's no time to waste."

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*But there's something 'bout you*

December 14, 1996

El was staring at the black dress bag hanging on the back of her

closet, her stomach sinking even lower the more she stared at it. She had been so terrified of all the horrible scenarios that could happen if she opened that bag. *What if it didn't fit? What if I don't like it? What if it looks different than what I remember? What if? What if? What if?*

Her breath started coming in quicker and shorter breaths, and she started seeing two of everything. Two beds, two dressers, two lamps, and two of those dreaded dress bags. Clutching at the thin robe her mother had given her to wear until "the big moment," she plastered herself against the wall. Fear and anxiety swirled in her chest, squeezing her heart until it felt like it might burst. And since Nancy had left to keep her sixteen-year-old sister from interfering too much, there wasn't anyone there to help—which might have been the scariest thought she'd had yet. There weren't many times when she'd felt alone, and this was a day she didn't expect that feeling to reassert its dominance in her system, but whenever it did, there was always one person she'd look to for comfort.

"Mike..." The whisper of a word had barely slipped past her lips, when the door opened, and her friends poured into her room, immediately surrounding her with their comforting chatter.

"Oh my gosh El you look great!" Jennifer praised, wrapping the brunette girl into a tight hug, before pulling back and studying her hair and—thankfully—still intact make-up.

"Little El's all grown up!" Max crowed, in a surprisingly good imitation of El's mom that morning. "That boy's going to drop when he sees you."

"For sure," the blonde agreed, stepping back. "Do you know what I would give for guys to look at me the way he's going to be looking at you?"

"Puh-lease," Max scoffed, shaking her head, nearly ruining the fancy ponytail her red hair had been pulled into. "You're telling me that men don't look at *Jennifer Hayes*, the wealthy, glam, perfume designer, with absolute adoration?"

"Well, they're not the right men, and not looking at me for the right reasons," she retorted, her blue eyes turning sad for a moment as she

played with the end of her blonde braid, before the happy light returned as quick as it had left. "Besides how's *Dustin*," Jennifer teased playfully. "I heard you guys moved in together."

"Yeah a few months ago. We're both pretty much running the arcade, and so we scraped together enough money to get an apartment a few blocks away." She trailed off as her watch let out a small *beep*. "We'll continue this later," the redhead promised as she turned to the door and nearly sprinted out of the room. "I'll be right back!"

El shook her head, a smile finally pulling at her lips, "I guess Max will always be Max."

Jennifer nodded, grinning as well. "And happy," she added wistfully. "You have a big day, are you ready?" She asked gently, but with the tone of a friend who already knew the answer.

El nodded resolutely, but still it was hard to look at the bag. "It's been a big day already. I have to be ready."

"And you will be," her mom quietly entered the room, followed by Holly and Nancy, their hair done up in identical yet simple and pristine buns, while her mom's brown hair was laying in loose waves down to her chin. She took one look at the room, the bag still zipped closed on the bed, Max's mysterious absence, and the way El's gaze stayed firmly on her mother's face, and tears welled in her brown eyes. "Oh sweetie," She rushed over and wrapped her arms around El, "I know it's scary, but you have nothing to worry about, I promise. Today is supposed to be one of the happiest days of your life, and we will all be there for you."

"Your mom's right," Nancy chimed in. She moved over to place her hand on El's arm reassuringly. "Everything's going to be okay. You're allowed to be happy and selfish and carefree today. Just promise me you'll have fun, okay?"

"I will," El smiled, brushing at the tears that had threatened to spill, before they could ruin her perfect day. Taking in a deep breath, she walked over to the bed and finally unzipped the black bag.

---

*'Cause if the whole world was watching I'd still dance with you*

December 14, 1996

It seemed to be a pattern in Mike's life, but car rides always seemed to pass by as if no time had passed at all, because he barely noticed his friends laughing and talking during the limo ride to the church. Before he knew it, his mom was standing in front of him, giving him the rundown of the afternoon and he was nodding along blankly.

"Mike!" She snapped, scowling darkly, "Are you even paying attention?"

His dark eyes focused on her exasperated expression, and smiled slightly before slinging an arm over her shoulder. "Don't worry, Mom. You've planned this down to a tee, and everything's going to be fine."

"I just..." her voice cracked, but she smoothed the front of her light blue dress and the steel was back in Karen Wheeler's eyes. "I just want to make sure today goes as smoothly as I can make it. God knows you both deserve it."

Mike nodded, his smile becoming sad but he kissed his mother on the head before he was caught up with saying hello to some of his family that had arrived early. It only took twenty minutes, but once Will pulled him aside and for the four of them to get into the proper order, with the newly arrived Nancy taking on the role of "worried mother hen."

"Ready," his sister asked him quietly, her dark hair pulled into a tight bun, with a thin crystal headband that matched Holly's wrapped around the base of the bun. "Don't screw this up," she whispered when he didn't respond, practically pushing him out the door when the music started to swell.

Walking through the church, he tried to avoid the stares of every eye in attendance, but it was impossible to not scan the faces and see the joy—and in some cases of his younger cousins and nephews, extreme boredom—emblazoned there. He made sure to keep the right amount of distance between himself and his parents, who had walked out before him, but he was probably still the most awkward person he

knew, and ended up narrowly avoiding a collision with his mother right before he got to the altar. She shot him an exasperated look before giving him a quick kiss on the cheek. His father gave him a short hug, before taking his wife by the hand and settling into their seats in the front row.

Taking a deep breath, he walked up the short steps, before turning to stare back down the aisle. The doors opened and Dustin and Max were the first to walk down, her red ponytail swinging behind her, strands of tiny crystals wrapped around the top of the hairdo, and were also intermixed with the hair itself. Dustin's dark blue tie complemented the slash of pale blue that made a small train and peeked out from the back of her floor-length, navy blue dress.

Before they had reached the end of the aisle, Will emerged from the doors, looking vaguely terrified as he escorted a beaming Jennifer Hayes. Her blonde hair was thrown in a braid woven with more strands of crystals, that was pulled over one shoulder, baring the other one due to her strapless dress. Will seemed to loosen up by the time they reached the end of the aisle, and shot Jennifer a quick, "secret," smile before they separated.

Lastly, came Lucas, who had a Wheeler sister on each arm, both of whom were gazing adoringly at their brother. Despite nearly the thirteen-year age difference, the two could've been twins, except for the different color of their hair. Holly had shot up in height in recent years, taking after Mike and their father in that respect, while Nancy stayed relatively the same size she'd been. Their matching dresses and hairstyles didn't do anything to disprove the notion that they could be twins.

All the girls carried small bunches of white roses, and their dark blue dresses were similar enough, but each had managed to inject their own style. While Jennifer's was strapless, Max's had two thick straps and a square neckline, Holly's was one-shouldered, and Nancy's had two thin straps and a draped neck.

Finally, once they all had reached the altar, a hush fell over the church as the music died for half a minute, before resuming as a familiar march. The doors opened once more, and Mike found himself glued to the young woman walking through them. El seemed



to float down the aisle, the wide, white skirt of her dress swishing along with every step she took. The lacy pattern that covered the top of the dress, tapered off at the waist, right where she was holding a bouquet of snowbells, bluebells, and white roses. The veil cascaded down her back, trailing behind her slightly, and giving her curls a frosty sheen. He thought he must have looked like an idiot, standing with a grin on his face, as Hopper and her mom each gave her a kiss on the cheek, and Mike took her hand, leading her up to the altar.

Max quickly swooped in, to gently take the bouquet, and as she was handing it off, he noted that the short, off-the-shoulder style of her dress left her tattoo uncovered and on full display. He felt swell of pride and affection towards the young woman next to him, and he gently traced the numbers as the priest began to speak.

"You may now be seated. We are gathered here today to celebrate the union of Michael John Wheeler, and Eleanor Jane Byers."

---

*Drive highways and byways to be there with you*

December 14, 1996

No matter how long the hours leading up to this moment had seemed, Mike would have gladly lived them again if they led to the same ending: standing in front of a priest, with El in a white dress, holding his hand, a shy smile on her face. He wanted to remember this moment for the rest of his life.

It had taken them years, and many trials to find one another again, and Mike wanted to make sure he never lost her again. They had been supporting each other for as long as they've known each other, and loving each other for nearly as long; the wedding was merely a formality.

Most of the priest's speech went in one ear and out the other, as Mike studied El out of the corner of his eye. Her face was shining with a radiance that didn't have much to do with the make-up she was wearing, but with the joyous light found in her eyes and in her pale pink smile. Small diamond teardrops hung from her ears, and a matching choker adorned her neck, but the simple snowflake pendant

he had given to her to wear to prom years ago, hung just above the sweetheart neckline of her dress. Mike's smile widened at that, as he didn't think she would wear some old necklace he had bought from the one department store in town, on their wedding day, but the fact that she had, made him want to shout with delight.

She squeezed his hand, her eyes darting meaningfully from his face to the priests,' one eyebrow cocked playfully.

"Sorry, what was that?" Mike blurted out, a red blush spreading across his face as awkward peals of laughter rippled through the church. El looked down at their joined hands, in mock disappointment, but the grin and light in her eyes betrayed her amusement at the situation.

"I said," the priest started condescendingly, "Mr. Wheeler, I believe you have prepared your own vows. Now would be the time to share those with us."

"Uh, yeah, right." Mike scrambled inside his tuxedo jacket's pockets, before emerging with a crumpled-up wad of paper. He gently tugged on El's hand, turning her so they were facing each other. "El, you were my first...everything. And I was so glad you were some of those firsts. My first crush, my first kiss, my first friend who was a girl, and my first girlfriend. But, others I wished could've been anyone but you. My first ex, my first broken heart and my first heartbreak.

"I lost you once, a long time ago but I still remember how it felt. I hated that you had to go, and I hated the monster that took you from me." Mike sucked in a deep breath before continuing, looking deep into El's hazel eyes. Who cares if most people thought "monster" was a metaphor when it meant anything but. "But most of all, I hated that no matter how hard I tried, you made your way back, and you never really needed my help, just someone to hold you when you came back.

"El, I promise, that I will always be that person who will hold you when you find your way back from wherever you are. I want to make so many new firsts with you. Our first car, our first house, our first anniversary, our first...whatever! Everything we do from now on will be a first, because we'll be doing it for the first time together.

"You were my first love, El Byers. When I was twelve years old I fell in love with you, and I promise that I'll never stop."

Mike rolled his eyes when he heard his mom loudly stifle a sob, but when he looked at El, her eyes were shining with unshed tears, a shaky grin adorning his own face.

"Ms. Byers," the priest interjected, and the couple turned towards him in vague surprise that there was someone standing in such close proximity to them. "Would you like to read your vows now?"

El nodded, wiping one hand underneath her eyes quickly, before extracting a piece of paper from a secret pocket in her dress. "Mike. Words were always your strength, and never really mine, but I'm going to try. You were my light in a very dark place. Because whenever I felt alone, or scared, or out of place, I thought of you. Your freckles, and your smile kept me going because I knew that there was still one promise you had to keep."

Mike chuckled at that, and when she looked at him with apprehension in her eyes, he merely smiled and nodded at her to keep going. He knew exactly what promise she was talking about, and how they had both clung to it in their darkest hours, a promise that was kept in so many ways but its originally intended one.

"It's always been hard for me to trust the ones I love, because my Papa taught me how love hurts people. But my real dad, and mom, and brothers have taught me how a proper family should be. And everyone up here has shown me what a friend is—one of the very first words you taught me, and a definition I'll always remember.

"That night, in that pillow fort you built for me, you said that a friend is someone that you'd do anything for. And I'll do anything for you, Mike...because you're my best friend. I'll cross worlds for you, and I'll be by your side when you need it the most, because you were the one who taught me what love is."

---

*Over and over the only truth*

*Everything comes back to you*

December 14, 1996

Mike beamed at his—to use a fairly overused cliché—blushing bride with complete adoration and astonishment at the vows spilling from her lips. He couldn't help but to stare into her earnest hazel eyes, and find a perfect reflection of the love that shone in his own.

More tears and sniffles could be heard from the congregation, mainly from his mom and Mrs. Byers-Hopper. Mike snuck a quick glance over his shoulder and saw his mom, with a watery smile and tears running down her cheeks, mouth, *I'm proud of you*, to him. He flashed her a grin, but soon turned back around as the priest started talking again.

"Do you, Eleanor Byers, take this man, Michael Wheeler, to be your lawfully wedded husband? In sickness and in health? For rich or for poor? Until death do you part?"

El took a deep breath, staring up at him, a smile playing at her lips, but her eyes took on a serious gaze, not unlike the one she wore when using her powers. "I promise," she said confidently, and Mike beamed so widely, he thought his cheeks would never stop hurting. He fumbled slightly with the ring, but soon, the thin band of silver was securely encircling her ring finger, and he couldn't have felt happier.

The priest shot his beloved a confused look, but shook his head and continued anyway. Hawkins, Indiana was a strange place, and one odd wedding ceremony where the bride said, "I promise" instead of "I do," probably barely registered on the scale of strange things that had happened in this town. "And do you, Michael Wheeler, take this woman, Eleanor Byers, to be your lawfully wedded wife? In sickness and in health? For rich or for poor? Until death do you part?"

*Not even the Upside-Down could stop me*, he thought, *nothing else matters now except for her*. "I promise."

As El slipped the plain silver ring over his finger, she furrowed her brows and stuck her tongue out a bit, like she always did when she was concentrating on something she desperately wanted to get right. Mike realized that he had to amend his earlier statement, because

seeing the twin rings on his and El's hands, made him feel lighter than he could have possibly thought possible. In fact, he wouldn't have been surprised if he just floated off the floor, this time without the use of telekinesis.

"By the power vested in me by the state of Indiana, I now pronounce you husband and wife," the priest turned to Mike, a smirk on his face—or possibly relief that the long ceremony was now over. "You may now kiss your bride."

Mike grinned, looping an arm around her white-clad waist and bent to kiss her lightly on the lips. Warmth seemed to flood from every point of contact, from where her hand rested on his arm, to where his other hand had come up to lightly brush her cheek. El was the one to pull back, but kept her forehead resting against his for another moment longer, savoring the moment as her new husband was. The cheers and whistles from their friends and family going completely unrecognized, as it was like they were in their own world.

"Promise?" He whispered, completely inaudible to anyone but her. *Promise that you'll always be there, and keep pushing me to be better, to be worthy of your love? Promise that you'll never stop doing what's right? Promise that you'll love me despite being a complete wasteoid?* He didn't actually say any of this, but he knew that he didn't have to ask, El already knew his insecurities and didn't care one bit.

"Promise."

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**A/N: So here was the fluff I've been promising you! I really hoped you enjoyed this chapter, and I want to know if I was too obvious with the fact that it turned out to be their wedding day, or if the surprise worked?**

**Here are the links to what I based the dresses off of, since they're period-accurate dresses, I wanted to show a visual representation because I don't know if words were enough.**

**Bridesmaids' dresses: [listing/483387016/vintage-1996-bombshell-evening-gowns](https://www.pinterest.com/483387016/vintage-1996-bombshell-evening-gowns)**

**El's wedding dress: [pin/473722454534987273](https://pin/473722454534987273)**

**As always, please review! Thanks for reading!**

## 4. Epilogue

A/N: Okay! Since we're officially halfway through Stranger Thursdays, here's the fourth and final installment of This Town! I hope you all really enjoy this epilogue, cause I've had a lot of fun working on this story and am pretty happy with the way it all finally turned out.

Thank you once again to ThisisMel for your amazing and uplifting review, and I am so grateful to everyone who read this little fic of mine.

Enjoy!

---

*You still make me nervous when you walk in the room*

December 14, 1996

El Wheeler gripped her husband's hand as they exited the church, and when she glanced up at him, she saw that the wide grin on his lips matched her own ecstatic expression. They had waited for each other for so long, and there had even been times when she thought that they wouldn't make it this far, but in the end, all of their struggles and battles made this moment—the moment when she walked out of a church into the cold December air, the wife of Mike Wheeler—so much sweeter.

"It's snowing," she whispered happily, tilting her face upwards, her eyes closed, to let the light flakes dust her face. Mike squeezed her hand affectionately, and dropping a sweet kiss onto her forehead. Only the slight *click* of a camera's shutter broke through the couple's bubble, and the two looked at Jonathan, sheepish looks on all three of their faces.

"Sorry," he muttered, staring down at his feet and fiddling with the strap on his camera, "it was too good a moment to pass up."

"It's fine, Jonathan," El assured her big brother, and had opened her mouth to say more, when the "official" photographer for their

wedding interrupted.

"It's actually given me an idea," the balding Mr. Adams, said. "If it's all right with the two of you, we could get some shots out here of the bride and groom, and whomever else they want. The natural light's not too horrendous, and it seems like a wasted opportunity not to use this snow falling as a backdrop. In fact, I even saw some places where..." As the photographer trailed off, babbling about where to take the pictures, Mike and El waved over all of the bridesmaids, best men, and their immediate families.

"I hope you guys don't mind staying out in the cold for a little longer," Mike joked, but cried out when Lucas and Dustin pulled him into a headlock. "What the hell is this for!"

"Come on, man!" Dustin crowed, beating his chest as if he was King Kong for some reason. "You're the first of us to get married! Mike married El," he started chanting in a sing-song voice, which Lucas, Will, Max, and Holly immediately picked up on, much to the irritation of the couple and their parents.

"Boys!" Mrs. Wheeler finally hissed, at the same time as El's mom said, "El, honey, I think the photographer's ready."

"Ah, yes. Now, if I could have the bride and groom over here," Adams started positioning nearly everyone in attendance around Mike and El, leading into the first round of what would be nearly two hours of picture-taking.

Adams managed to get the sweet yet traditional pictures of Mike and El in a variety of poses, along with nearly every conceivable combination of everyone in attendance—El with Hopper, her mom, Will, and Jonathan; Mike with his family; the original party of four; Jennifer, Max, and El; the list went on and on. And in between all of the official photographs, Jonathan was there to capture all of the in-between moments, showing the joy of the aftermath of a wedding. El playfully squished in between her brothers as her mom and Hop looked at each other in exasperation; Nancy putting her brother in yet another headlock, as his mom hid her face, Holly cheered on her older sister, and Mr. Wheeler just looked lost; Will jumping onto Lucas's back, as Dustin and Mike laughed; a huge three-way hug



between the girls, all of their faces alight with joy and reminiscent of their teenage years.

Before long, many lips had turned blue, and the two moms urged their children to take their antics down a notch so they could go to the reception. El simply nodded sympathetically, feeling still rather comfortable in the chilly weather, but noticed how Mike was fast approaching the point where a dark red would become the permanent coloring of his face.

She curled up next to him in the limo, laying her head on his shoulder, and intertwining their hands, as they made their way to their reception. El tuned out most of the exuberant chatter of their friends and family, silently observing them. Their interactions, body language, expressions, anything that gave clues to their mindset at that moment.

The parents seemed to be happy enough making pleasant small talk to each other, Hopper's arm was resting around her mom's shoulders, and Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler were holding hands happily. Lucas, Dustin and Mike were arguing loudly about something probably unimportant, but Max quickly shut it down by pulling her boyfriend back into his seat, a worried look on her face. Will and Jonathan were talking to the latter's girlfriend, Mel, a tall brunette with dyed blonde tips, a quiet voice, but a wide smile. Jennifer, Holly, and Nancy were all gushing over some funny picture Steve had taken of their kids during the ceremony.

*Everyone is so happy*, El realized, wondering when the last time all of them were so incredibly delighted all at the same time. It probably had never happened before.

They finally reached the hotel where the reception was held, and Mike and El were quickly escorted off to the side, to await their grand entrance. After all the buzz from the limo ride and the photo shoot, the quietness that came with being separated from the group was an odd, but welcome break.

"You ready?" Mike asked, staring at the big doors in front of them, the hand not holding El's tapped against his leg in a random pattern.

"No," El replied honestly, feeling the first flutters of butterfly wings in her stomach and a tight feeling form in her chest. "Nervous. You?"

"Super nervous," Mike admitted, flashing her a wavering grin. "But we'll get through it together."

El nodded, as they heard their cue, and pushed the doors open. Cheers echoed throughout the hall, as the newlyweds made their way to the dance floor, quickly taking their positions. Max ran up and grabbed the bouquet once more, so El could place both of her hands on Mike's shoulders, locking her fingers behind his neck. She smiled up at her husband, starting to sway in time with the music. It wasn't any song she could sing along to, but soft and slow, and lyrical in a way that let all of her fears and nervousness melt away to reveal a young woman hopelessly in love with her new husband.

"I finally took you to the Snow Ball," Mike whispered, his hands resting on El's waist, his forehead only an inch or so from hers.

"You've been saying that for years," she quipped, a smirk tugging at her lips. "There was the one in eighth grade, *and* the one you created for me when we decided to dance in the snow with no shoes."

"Yeah, I guess. But this is the one I've always wanted to give you." He tilted his head for her to look at the winter wonderland embellishments that adorned the room, and the fog swirling around their ankles. "The one that means you're finally, an *official* part of my family. You're finally home safe."

El cocked her head, a little confused by his statement. *I've been home for years*, she thought, her hazel eyes boring into his dark ones to try and find his meaning. "I am home," she stated simply. "Home is Hawkins, and you."

Mike smiled, bending down to kiss her softly right as the music stopped. El closed her eyes and felt her lips turn up at his touch, taking his hand once more after they broke apart. "I love you," he whispered, still seemingly unaware that their first dance was over.

"I love you too," El replied immediately, kissing his cheek one more time, before leading her husband over to their table, smiling as she

looked around at her family all together, all safe and content, and when she looked at Mike with love in her eyes, she was glad all of her nervousness had disappeared like butterflies in the wind.

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*Them butterflies—they come alive when I'm next to you*

December 14, 1996

Some poppy dance song that El didn't know the name of was blasting through the speakers as she danced, her dress's white skirt flared out around her legs, at the center of the circle of her friends and the rest of the guests. She threw her head back and laughed, so filled with joy that she could think of no other way to express it than through her laughter and dancing.

A pale finger tapped her shoulder, and she glanced over her shoulder, her brows furrowing when she saw Max looking at her with an unreadable look on her face. The simply redhead motioned for El to follow her. Jennifer sent the two of them a concerned look, but Max just shook her head, mouthing *I'll tell you later*. The blonde nodded, turning back to the party, as El picked her dress up and out of the way of her heels in order to follow Max. She dropped a kiss on Mike's nose as she passed him, relishing in the simple fact that she could, but also as a reassurance that she would be back soon.

The two young women stopped in an empty hallway just outside the reception hall, and the muffled music still echoed throughout the corridor, unintentionally insuring that the duo wouldn't be overheard.

"What's wrong?" El asked, her large eyes unwaveringly focused on her friend, who was currently staring at the hem of her dress.

"I didn't want to tell you this and ruin your day," Max started, rambling on in a way that was very unlike her; she had always been one to get right to the point. "And I already told Dustin, but he didn't really want to tell Mike or Lucas or any of them either, yet. But I couldn't really keep this from you either, because I'm just so *scared* and I have *no idea* what we're going to do."

"Max!" El interrupted forcefully, her voice cutting through her friend's breakdown and forcing green eyes to meet hazel ones. "What's wrong?"

"I'm pregnant," Max blurted out, her cheeks turning only a few shades lighter than her hair. "Dustin's the father obviously, but..."

Before she could finish, El wrapped her up in a tight hug, much to the chagrin of her friend. "I'm so happy for you," she whispered through a bright smile. El wasn't one to care about her "day" being overshadowed by someone else's happiness, in fact, she was overjoyed that her friend was reaching a different, but just as important milestone on the same day she herself reached one.

"Thank you," Max replied, wiping tears from her eyes when she thought El couldn't see. Giving her friend a quick squeeze, before stepping back from the hug, she tossed her head as if to say that everything was normal. "Now come on! Your fiancé, no your *husband*, will be worried about if you're not back in time for cake."

"Why?" She asked, but turning towards the doors. *Why would eating cake be so important?* El thought, trying to remember if anything significant had happened during dessert at Nancy and Steve's wedding, or at her mom and Hopper's small reception.

Once they re-entered the reception, El smiled to herself when she saw all of the work that her mom, and Mrs. Wheeler, and herself had done had paid off, to make sure that the space was transformed into a Winter Wonderland, but not so overdone that looked tacky. All of the stress and the nerves and fears she'd had about all the things that could go wrong, had thankfully been unnecessary, and she couldn't imagine the wedding going any more perfectly.

Max quickly said goodbye as she sprinted off as fast as she could—which was pretty surprisingly fast given her three-inch heels—to go find Dustin. El looked around the room, her eyes finally alighting on a strange pairing: Lucas and Jennifer. It wasn't strange because they had never hung out, just strange in the way that El couldn't recall a time when they'd hung out, just the two of them, there was always a buffer of herself, or one of their other friends. She shimmied her way through the crowd of people separating them, incredibly tempted to

use her powers to clear a path, but decided she didn't want to worry about staining her dress with blood.

"Hey El!" Jennifer threw her arms around the brunette, who was slightly peeved at the fact that she was still several inches shorter than her friend, despite her higher heels. "How are you? Are you having fun?"

"Yes," she replied simply, returning the nineteenth hug from her friend. Noticing the questioning glances her two friends were sending each other, she asked, "What were you guys talking about?"

"Oh," Jennifer waved her hand in a flippant motion, but El could tell something was troubling her. "It's nothing really. I'm just being stupid."

El just turned to Lucas, and raised one eyebrow, looking subtly down at her white dress, an expectant expression on her face.

"Jennifer wants to get back together, or maybe just get together—were you two ever actually together?—with Will," Lucas spilled, talking quickly and clearly stringing several thoughts together, a mischievous smile splitting his dark face with blindingly white teeth.

"That's not..." Jennifer protested weakly, her hands on her hips. "That's not what I said! And no, we were never 'officially' a couple, alright? We went out a few times in high school, and went to prom, but never really dated." Her words and body language made it sound like she was merely listing facts she could care less about, but her tone betrayed her disappointment at the words coming out of her own mouth.

El's grin soon matched Lucas's as she too started thinking of excuses to push together her brother, and the girl who he had liked for decades, who was not only pretty and rich, but liked him back just as much. But as her wheels were spinning, Jennifer interrupted, quickly turning the conversation back to El.

"So, what'd you think of all the speeches? Max's was perfect, of course, and yours," she nodded to Lucas, "and Will's were sweet, but Dustin's was..."

"Nearly incoherent?" Lucas supplied, nodding in agreement with his own statement. Her curly haired friend had basically gotten up in front of both of their families and all their friends, to tell seemingly every embarrassing story about Mike as a kid, or whenever the two of them were "grossly ruining the very concept of romance for the rest of us." It seemed like a self-imposed contest to see if he could get Mike's face to permanently turn red.

"Yeah, he nearly told everyone that I'm—" El quickly cut herself off, before she revealed her secret to Jennifer. Because although the two had been friends for years, the subject of her "powers" never came up often, and she was always so careful to not use them frequently.

"Telekinetic?" The blonde finished, smirking at the shell-shocked faces of her friends. "Come on," she laughed, "you guys didn't think I would figure it out? I've known for a while, but I wanted you to trust me enough to tell me."

"I do trust you enough," El quickly replied, shaking her head emphatically. "It just never seemed like a good time to mention it." As if to prove she wasn't lying about trusting her, she stared at the crystals in Jennifer's braid and made them crawl up and down the blonde strands.

"Awesome," Jennifer breathed, snagging a napkin from a nearby table for El to wipe away the tiny bead of blood.

As if called to the use of her powers, Mike soon pushed his way over to the trio, wrapping an arm around his wife's shoulder when he arrived. "What's going on here?"

"Oh, just letting Jennifer in on our D&D secret," Lucas replied, quickly settling back into the stupid code the boys had come up with in the years after her return to discuss her powers around lots of other people. "You know, the proud princess's powers?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Mike looked from El to Jennifer, a slightly concerned and protective look on his face. "Wha-what for?"

"Calm down, Mike," Jennifer said, "I was just saying how I've known for a while about El's abilities. I mean, a kid comes back to life after I

went to his funeral and after all the shit that went down the following Halloween, with the same group of people at the center of it, like I'm not going to think something freaky is up. I still remember you making Troy Harrington wet his pants in seventh grade," Jennifer looked at El with awe and respect in her eyes. "Oh, and don't worry, I won't tell a soul."

"Okay then," Mike drew out the words, clearly becoming more relaxed in the blonde's presence. "What were you talking about before that?"

"How Jennifer's going to win Will back with some big, showy statement tonight," Lucas teased, laughing when he saw the terrified look on Jennifer's face, and the confusion on Mike and El's.

"We never, we never talked about making a *statement*," Jennifer groaned, hiding her blushing face in her hands. "I just wanted to talk to him, maybe go for a drink some time."

"You should ask the band to play *Should I Stay or Should I Go*," El suggested, receiving a hopeful glance from her friend, and sad but reassuring smiles from the guys. "It's his favorite song. Ask him to dance to it."

Mike whipped his head around, shouting something incomprehensible to his mom, before turning back to the group. "That's a great idea, El, but it's going to have to wait until after cake," he started tugging her towards the main table, where a simple three-tier cake, decorated with small snowflakes and white flowers was waiting.

"What is so important about cake?" She asked, still not understanding why this was a big deal to everyone.

"Dustin would say because it's delicious," Mike started, smiling as he wrapped his hand around El's as they cut into the bottom section together. "But it's really this tradition, of well..." He trailed off as he went to offer her the piece of cake on his fork, before changing direction at the last minute, and smudging it onto her nose. He laughed at the startled expression on her face, as similarly good-hearted chuckles spread through the gathered crowd, but his face

quickly turned apprehensive when he saw her concentrated stare.

Once Will had helped Mike clean off his cheek and neck from where the cake was launched at him—due to El's "flailing arm"—El smiled as he gingerly wiped the icing off her nose, slyly mopping up the blood about to drop from her nostril in the same motion.

The night progressed fairly smoothly from then on, only hitting a bit of a rocky patch when Holly caught the bouquet, and one of Mike's college friends, and previous tormentor, James caught the garter. He looked murderous at having his little sister put in that position, but El saw the way the two were—what was it Jennifer said—making eyes out of each other?

"They're just flirting," she whispered, as another dance song came on, drowning out her words to all but Mike.

"Exactly," he grumbled, but eventually perked up when El shot him a warning glance. "Okay, okay, I get it. But if he tries anything..." He trailed off, as if to let the threat hang in the air, but it was more likely that he couldn't come up with a suitable measure of punishment for his friend if he were to get too handsy with Mike's sister.

She gave him a quick kiss, before pulling him onto the dance floor, groaning and dragging his feet, but Mike quickly gave in, and the two danced for the rest of the night together. When *Should I Stay* came on, they giggled at Will's dumbfounded expression, right before Jennifer Hayes grabbed his hands and spun around, and when a bright smile spread across his face—one that grew even brighter when she responded to his kiss on her cheek with a kiss on his lips. Lucas danced with Nancy and Steve's kids, picking up their littlest boy and putting him on his shoulders, only grinning when the boy's pudgy hands tugged at his short hair. Hopper and her mom each grabbed one of her hands and one of Will's, and they danced in a circle for a few songs, before the parents got too tired. Jonathan's girlfriend, Mel—who was now officially deemed cool according to all of the boys—taught her the Macarena, a smile never leaving either woman's face, as Jonathan stopped snapping away on his camera to look at the two with adoration. Max and Dustin pushed their way to the center, performing a ludicrous dance routine, that El was frankly



surprised the redhead agreed to.

As people started getting tired, and saying their goodbyes, even after both sets of parents had sat down to get some rest, the core party—Mike and El, Max and Dustin, Will and Jennifer, Lucas, Nancy, Steve, Jonathan, and even Mel—were losing themselves in the beat of the music and the joy of the occasion. El looked around, a smile plastered on her face, and felt her heart beat a little faster and fill up a little bit more with the love she held for those who surrounded her.

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*Over and over the only truth*

*Everything comes back to you*

*Everything comes back to you*

December 14, 1996

The night air was cold, as it was nearly midnight, as Mike and El finally left the reception thru a corridor of their barely awake friends. Max was leaning against the wall for support, and Dustin and Will looked ready to fall asleep at any moment. As the couple was leaving, Nancy gave her brother a hug, and rubbed his head affectionately before going back into the hotel to find her husband and children.

"Oh, it was an amazing wedding," Jennifer gushed, somehow finding it in herself to be cheerful, much to the bewilderment of El. As the brunette, wrapped her arms around her friends' suit-clad shoulders, she took a quick count of those waiting outside, and noticed that Will was missing his jacket. She gave her friend a knowing smile, before going to hug both her brothers tightly.

"Thank you," she said, looking at each of them in turn. Will looked confused as to why she was thanking them, while Jonathan just looked tired but proud.

"For what?" Will asked, ducking his head and rubbing the toe of his shoe across the step, like he always used to do in school when he was embarrassed.

"For being my brothers," came her simple reply.

With a quick wave to the rest of her friends, El took Mike's outstretched hand and let herself be led into the waiting car. The couple exchanged smiles as he started driving towards his old house, where they would pick up their bags, before heading to the airport to catch their flight to their honeymoon in California.

"Did you have fun?" Mike asked, managing to sound awkward yet breaking the odd silence that had settled between the two of them. He fiddled with the cuffs on his tuxedo's jacket, glancing over at El every so often, but keeping his eyes fixed on the road ahead.

"Of course," she smiled, placing her hand lightly on top of his arm, a move that immediately seemed to still some of his nervous energy. "I'm ready for our adventures."

And Eleven Byers and Mike Wheeler would have so many adventures, big and small.

She would giggle at the way he insisted on carrying her around, whether it was piggyback or bridal-style on their honeymoon, and into the first few months after they got back. And he would always say that it was because he wanted her to be treated like the princess she was—to which El would merely roll her eyes—but he would wait almost a year to tell her that it was because he was making up for the way he regretted not carrying her through the halls of Hawkins Middle School in November of 1983—to which El would also roll her eyes and insist that it was not something worth regretting.

El would cheer when she got the invitation to Max's baby shower, running around the apartment, before she would show Mike, who would then call Dustin and angrily interrogate him as to why this was the first time he was hearing that the couple was having a child. She would wipe the tears from Max's face when she worried that she wasn't fit to be a mom to little Ridley, or that there wasn't enough money in owning the arcade to support the three of them, but El would insist that the baby girl was going to have two doting parents and aunts and uncles that spoiled her rotten. She would hold Ridley in her arms when the girl was not even one and would know right then that she wanted a child of her own.

Mike and she would try for years to have children, as they both

wanted them desperately, but their attempts always seemed to fall a little short. It would lead to tense conversations, and slammed doors—both telekinetically shut and by hand—between the two, but by the time the sun rose the next morning, they would realize that what mattered was the two of them, going through their lives together, and that sometimes that meant taking some harsh losses. But when Terri Wheeler would arrive in 1999, the two would kiss, ignoring El's sweaty forehead and hospital gown, and marvel at the way their family had grown to three.

She would walk with her husband down the aisle again, although this time as Will's best man and Jennifer's matron of honor, only a year and a half after the two finally gotten together at Mike and El's own wedding reception. El would wipe tears from her eyes and wonder at how far the two had come, and she would forever be grateful to Jennifer for making Will as happy as Mike made her. The two would move to New York so Will could work on finding more illustration jobs and for Jennifer to expand her perfume company, and El would cry on the day they left, but Mike would pull her in close and remind her that her brother and his wife were going to be just fine, and, more importantly, they were going to be happy.

The roles would be reversed when Lucas finally completed basic training, and Mike broke down, thinking that he was going to lose one of his closest friends. But tears of fear would soon be turned to tears of joy when he found out that Lucas would be working in Chicago, writing software codes for the military's server's protection. When he left, the party would be down two of its original members, but El would be the fiercest advocate of keeping in touch, and would make sure she talked to her brother and Lucas at least once a week, and to go see them every few months. And there would be one memorable trip when her and Mike went to visit a few months after Lucas had moved there, when the two would get off at the wrong subway stop, and would walk around the city for hours, talking to Lucas every couple hours through a pay phone, trying to find their way to his apartment.

When El would lay awake, whether she had just woken from the odd nightmare about the Upside-Down, or simply couldn't sleep, she would thank her lucky stars that she had found friendship and love,

in the form of an ever-growing party of friends—one that had only three members when she got there, but quickly grew to six, and then seven, and then more once the next generation started to arrive. She would organize playdates between Ridley and Terri, and then to include Jennifer and Will's twins, Jackson and Luke, and Max and Dustin's next child, a boy named Danny. And she would beam as she wrapped her arms around her husband, as their house would be filled with the laughter and chatter of old friends, and their old friends' kids.

She would cherish the photo album her oldest brother gave her, from the moment he gave it to her on her and Mike's first anniversary. It would be filled with pictures from that day, both many candid of the friends enjoying themselves, and the posed pictures. El would always love the one pictures Jonathan had taken of her laughing at something Mike had said, while all of their friends stood on either side of the two smiling, or giggling, or in Dustin's case, making a ridiculous face, because it showed her that their group had not changed much since that day, in fact, the bonds between them only becoming even stronger as time passed.

Eleven Byers and Mike Wheeler would have so many adventures, but the one thing that would never need to be tested is their love for each other. It would show in the way she always grabbed his hand when they were walking, and in the way she would often pretend to not see the way he looked at her with awe in his eyes, when he thought she wasn't looking. Small ventures out to the movies or the grocery store would become epic quests, only to be completed by the true of heart. And when Mike's first book was released—with illustrations by Will Byers—she would sob at the way the proud princess fell in love with the lowly knight, even after the princess had saved herself, with the help of a brave party of heroes. Their romance would inspire the kids who would visit her at the library, and would baffle the middle-aged desk drones who would work with Mike.

But none of that would happen just quite yet, and as El sat in the car in a white dress, twisting her wedding band and engagement rings around her finger, she only hoped that such a future would come to pass.

"We are going to have adventures, aren't we, Mike?" She asked

quietly, staring at his freckled cheek, until it creased into a smile and her hazel eyes locked onto his.

"Of course we are El. We're going to have so many adventures, just you wait," he replied, leaning over to quickly press his lips to hers, before opening the door and rushing around to the passenger side, and carry her, bridal-style into the old Wheeler house. She rested her head on his shoulder, a smile on her face and only one question on her lips.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

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**A/N: So there you go! I hope you liked the ending (I'm always a sucker for a happy ending), and although I don't have any immediate plans for a sequel or addition in the same universe, I would keep an eye out because I'm sure Season 2 will strike some cord of inspiration in me! Please review or comment about what you thought of the story as I am always so grateful for all my readers!**